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How I Learned to Play the 'Ukulele

By John King

The little twanger has a voice and, yes, indeed, it sings



Kolomona, the Hawaiian Troubadour, was painted by Hubert Vos in 1898



Let me tell you a secret. The 'ukulele is Portuguese. It's true. A trio of Portuguese woodworkers from the island of Madeira, who emigrated to Hawai'i in 1879, began making the little four-string guitars in Honolulu in the 1880s. But they didn't call them 'ukuleles back then; instead, they used the instrument's Portuguese name: *machete* (pronounced mah-SHET). The machete had been popular with Madeirans for hundreds of years; in fact, it was their national instrument. One American, a senator named Dix, who spent a winter season at Madeira in the 1840s, reported that in the right hands a machete could produce very pretty music, especially when accompanied by a guitar or cello, but by itself, it was thin and meager. "It is an invention of the island," he wrote, "and one of which the island has no great cause to be proud. It is not probable that the machete will ever emigrate from Madeira."

Ladies and gentlemen, please give it up for Sen. John Dix, visionary.

Actually, the little twanger went anywhere the Madeira islanders did, which was just about everywhere: Capetown, Honolulu, the Antilles, Asia, North and South America. In the 1850s, an Oxford clergyman and author named Charles Lutwidge Dodgson snapped the first-ever pictures of the tiny, toylke instrument. The subjects of that shoot were three young sisters—Alice, Lorina and Edith Liddell—each dressed in Madeiran lace and holding a machete. Dodgson, who is remembered today by his pen name, Lewis Carroll, was especially fond of 6-year-old Alice. You remember Alice, too, don't you? In Wonderland?

Brushes with greatness aside, it wasn't until the Madeirans and their guitarettes arrived at the fertile islands of Hawai'i that the popularity of the little instrument really took root and grew. And grew. First, it was subjected to a complete makeover: constructed of native Hawaiian koa wood instead of the traditional til (sesame plant) and pine, given a revamped tuning, a different repertoire and a new name. Secondly, troupes of Hawaiian

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Anthony Zablan was one of the Hawaiian musicians



Kamaka's pineapple ukulele patent from 1928. The name was a pun on the Dole trademark for 'Ukulele Brand Pineapple.

performers with 'ukuleles fanned out across America, performing at world's fairs, chautauquas and vaudeville, making names for themselves and generating a lot of interest in Hawai'i, Hawaiian music and culture. Thirdly, when the 17 million visitors who attended the Panama-Pacific International Exposition in San Francisco in 1915 went crazy for Hawaiian music and the 'ukulele, the event sparked a nationwide mania for the instrument that didn't subside until the Great Depression.

About that makeover: Woodworkers did a brisk business in Madeira, making furniture, cabinets and curios, as well as stringed instruments. They knew their stuff, and why not—*madeira* means wood in Portuguese—but there was one kind of wood they didn't have: koa. *Acacia koa Gray*, sometimes called Hawaiian mahogany, had been revered for centuries by Native Hawaiians, who used it for their canoes and calabashes. Prized for its deep red color, curly grain and capacity to take a high polish, it was—is—arguably the most beautiful wood in the world, and grows only in Hawai'i. Garbed in Hawaiian koa, the little machete took on a whole new luster. Today, a 1930s-vintage Martin 5K ukulele (K for koa)—the “holy grail” of ukedom—will set you back about \$10K, if you can find one for sale.

The 'ukulele's famous my-dog-has-fleas tuning was actually borrowed from another Madeiran instrument, a five-string guitar called the *rajao* (pronounced rah-ZHOW). The original machete tuning is open-G; when and why it was changed to my-dog-has-fleas is one of those little mysteries that always leads to more questions than answers. In the early 1890s, a fellow named Holstein, who headed up the music department of the Hawaiian News Co., published a pamphlet entitled *Chords of the Taro-patch Guitar*, which is what Honoluluans called the *rajao* in those days. Holstein, an astute businessman, also included directions for tuning the “ukulele-guitar”; you tune it, he said, the same as you tune the top four strings of the taro-patch. Whether this reflected the practice of the day, or whether Holstein effected a whole new trend in tuning, is impossible to say. It's the old riddle of the chicken and the egg. Even the origins of the mnemonic my-dog-has-fleas is lost to us. They do tell a humorous story about it in Honolulu, though. A *keiki* walks into the Kamaka 'ukulele factory on South Street and tells Sam Kamaka, “I want to buy a flea string for my 'ukulele.” When Sam suggests the kid means a “C” string, the little *keiki* replies, “No, I don't! When my *kumu* [teacher] tunes my 'ukulele, she sings 'My-dog-has-fleas' and it's the flea string that broke!”

Recently, a controversy arose involving players who tuned their G strings—that's the “my” string—down an octave, so-called low-G tuning. The traditionalists, using—you guessed it—high-G tuning, bemoaned the modernists destroying the one thing that made the 'ukulele unique, all for the sake of a few extra notes. In the interest of full disclosure, I have to tell you, I'm a high-G man, but I don't feel the least bit threatened by those players who've succumbed to the Dark Side. Understandably, not everyone feels the way I do. One of my high-G colleagues told me about a recurring dream he has where he drives legions of low-G players over the Pali—Kamehameha style—thereby uniting the Islands under one tuning, forever and ever. One other wrinkle: Even though I tune to high-G, I do it starting from the other end of the jingle, fleas-has-dog-my. I wonder what Jonathan Swift would have made of that?



Hawaiian music at the turn of the 20th century, the period when the 'ukulele was just becoming popular, was often described as weird—not outer-space weird, but exotic—and sensuous, because it was used to accompany the “hula-hula” dance. When missionaries began teaching the Hawaiians how to sing hymns—the ancients didn't have familiar conventions like melody and harmony—the natives took the square-sounding tunes and rhythms, set them to Hawaiian poetry and created a new type of musical expression: *nahe nahe*, or sweet Hawaiian music. The soft, vowel-rich Hawaiian language, with its unusual accents, combined with the simple harmonies of Christian hymnody, produced a beautiful, compelling music of almost universal appeal. And this “weird and sensuous” music was made by men and women who sang while thrumming out an accompaniment on their 'ukulele.

But how did the machete end up with a name like 'ukulele? In Hawaiian, 'ukulele literally means the louse—'uku—that jumps—lele—in honor of that other European import, *Ctenocephalides Felis*, the cat flea. This is one of those little mysteries where there is one question and a lot of possible answers. On a multiple-choice test (I didn't tell you there'd be a quiz?), the options might look something like this:

- A. The performer's fingers flew so fast, they looked like jumping fleas.
- B. King Kalakaua's vice chamberlain was small and nimble like a flea, so he acquired the nickname 'Ukulele. He was also a gifted musician and played the machete so finely that the instrument became eponymous.
- C. 'Ukulele has another, poetic meaning: the gift that came from afar.
- D. Some Hawaiians likened the machete to the 'ukeke, an indigenous string instrument. They called it the 'ukeke-lele, or dancing 'ukeke, which was shortened to 'ukê-lele, and then changed to 'ukulele.
- E. None of the above.

At the time, no one thought it was very important how the 'ukulele got its name; at least, if anyone knew, they weren't telling. It wasn't until the instrument achieved worldwide acclaim that people started wondering. The result was that all of these explanations, and a few others besides, were trotted out years after the fact. So take your best shot. Poll the audience. Call a friend. Final answer? Your guess is as good as mine.

Did you know the 'ukulele has a head, neck and body, and a slew of other anthropomorphic features, including a voice? Accomplished players are said to make their instruments sing. There are soprano ukes, concert ukes, tenor and baritone ukes, each bigger than the last; one Chicago company even marketed a bass uke in the 1930s. The tenor seems to be the most popular choice for players in Hawai'i today, but when Jack London visited Honolulu in 1907, 'ukuleles came in only one size, the soprano. London likened the 'ukulele to a young guitar; he even managed to work it into a few of his short stories and novels. Curiously, the only difference between a soprano and a tenor (or a concert) 'ukulele is the size of the instrument. The tuning and range—whether high-G or low-G—are the same for all three. Imagine the havoc it would create at the opera if tenors were just taller, wider, deeper versions of sopranos.

In the early 1920s, after it had enjoyed a great vogue spanning the better part of a decade—and a world war—the 'ukulele began to garner a number of detractors. Since it had been advertised as an instrument

anyone could learn to play, nearly everyone tried. Those stricken with crummy-uke-player syndrome (CUPS—each letter is pronounced) were chronically unaware of their affliction; obliviousness was symptomatic. And so they played on. And on.

CUPS made some wax poetic, including this anonymous piece, which appeared in a newspaper in 1917:

Lines to a Ukalale

*(You call it “you-kal-laylie” when you call
it anything fit to print.)*

*I need no nerve tonic when
neighbors harmonic
Hold concerts all hours of the night.
I'll stand for the fiddle,
though hoping the lid'll
Be clamped down before morning light.
When some blithe soprano
drowns out the py-ano
I smile at her stepladder yelp.
I know how to suffer, but,
say, there's one duffer
Who'll find me much rougher—
the whelp!
He tortures me daily
With his ukalale,
That weird ukalale—
Oh, help!*

Make no mistake, despite their popular appeal, 'ukulele—and 'ukulele players—irritated a lot of people. When the last of the original Portuguese uke makers died in Honolulu in 1922, newspapers across the U.S. mainland scurried to print this story:

Hawaiian Not Guilty

*The death in Honolulu of Manuel
Nunes discloses information that leads to
the complete vindication
of the Hawaiians of the charge of
inventing the ukulele. Nunes was the originator of this instrument. In his idle
hours he fashioned a guitar-like contraption from a cigar
box and a few strings. Others developed and “improved” upon the thing, which has
been pestering civilization ever since. It is hard to suspect a serious
minded islander of indulging in that sort of mischief.*

Some real literary heavyweights were inspired to put pen to paper while under the spell of the uke. Two

Englishmen come to mind. The first, Rupert Brooke, sailed to Hawai'i in 1913; his ode to the 'ukulele is nothing less than a sonnet:

Waikiki

*Warm perfumes like a breath
from vine and tree
Drift down the darkness.
Plangent, hidden from eyes,
Somewhere an eukaleli thrills and cries
And stabs with pain the night's
brown savagery.
And dark scents whisper; and
dim waves creep to me,
Gleam like a woman's hair,
stretch out, and rise;
And new stars burn into
the ancient skies,
Over the murmurous soft Hawaiian sea.*

*And I recall, lose, grasp, forget again,
And still remember, a tale I have
heard, or known
An empty tale, of idleness and pain,
Of two that loved—or did
not love—and one
Whose perplexed heart
did evil, foolishly,
A long while since, and by
some other sea.*

I've been told with absolute authority that the last bit is about Adam and Eve and their fall from grace. I believe it. And if there were "eukalelis" in the Garden of Eden, it truly must have been Paradise.

You probably noticed that Brooke did an even worse job of spelling 'ukulele than our first, anonymous poet did: eukaleli, ukalele. Writer Malcolm Lowry spelled it u-k-e-l-e-l-e, which is actually in the dictionary as an alternative to u-k-u-l-e-l-e. As a young man, Lowry's ambition had been to be a professional 'ukulele player, but, tragically, he was one of those people beset with CUPS. Before his death in 1957, he wrote:

Epitaph

*Malcolm Lowry
Late of the Bowery
His prose was flowery
And often glowery*

*He lived, nightly, and drank, daily
And died playing the ukelele.*

Some people may tell you the 'ukulele is easy to play, but don't you believe them. Like most instruments, it's easy to play badly and hard to play well. I've learned a lot about the uke—and myself—since I started playing in 1960, while living in 'Ewa Beach. I was 6 years old. My mother played and one day I picked up her Kamaka pineapple—so-called because the body has an oval shape, like a pineapple, instead of a figure eight. The first thing I recognized was that playing the uke (which we all pronounced colloquially, *yook*) was not as easy as everyone had said it was. It was downright difficult. The second thing I noticed, after fumbling around for half an hour, was that I had absolutely no talent. Now, what seems like an inauspicious start was really a series of valuable life lessons. Although it took me a few years to realize it, in that first half-hour I had learned—or at least been introduced to—some important concepts: Don't believe everything everyone tells you; be honest with yourself; talent is relative—those who learn quicker than you do are talented, and those who don't, aren't; anytime someone tells you something is easy to learn, it's probably because they want to sell you lessons. At least I wasn't a candidate for CUPS. I knew that I sucked.

Over the years I got a guitar, took a bunch of lessons and learned how to play. It was not that I wanted to *learn*. I was just obsessed with the idea of *playing*. Because the guitar and the lessons had been an investment made on my behalf, my parents forced me to practice 30 minutes every day. My musical ability seemed to evolve at a geologic clip characterized by long periods of stasis punctuated with sudden forward lurches. Through it all I would occasionally take up my mother's pineapple, strum it and give myself a progress report. Invariably, the verdict was: I was a terrible uke player. After three decades of this my brain rebelled. No way. It wasn't possible. I had learned to play the guitar. Classical, no less. I was even teaching guitar at an expensive liberal arts college. If I couldn't play the uke, which is just a small guitar, then it must be the instrument I was using, right? At the time, I was ready to concede Mom's old Kamaka was good for nothing more than hanging on the wall—or turning into fancy koa-wood kindling. But then I decided to try one more thing. In my classical studies I'd learned that guitars had once been tuned “my-dog-has-fleas,” like 'ukuleles. Of course, musicologists had a proper academic name for it: re-entrant tuning.

In the time of J.S. Bach—some years before Capt. James Cook stumbled upon the island he called Owyhee—guitarists armed with re-entrantly tuned instruments had pioneered a style of playing they called *campanela*, which means little bell sounds. The bottom line is, they played each note of a melody on a different string, creating a sound like a harp—or little, pealing bells—where notes over-rang one another. I taught myself an appropriate Bach tune using the campanela technique and applied it to my mother's pineapple. It was a revelation. The instrument had a voice and when I played, it sang to me. Since then, I've recorded a few 'ukulele CDs, published a couple of collections of uke pieces and played around the country at various music festivals. I don't think any of that is particularly significant; What is important is that I never gave up on the 'ukulele, or myself. If I had, I never would have discovered my aptitude for playing. That discovery—an epiphany, really—was a big relief. Those things you hear when you're a kid, like “slow and steady wins the race” and “good things come to those who wait” and “talent is 1 percent inspiration and 99 percent perspiration” have been revealed to me in my life in unexpected ways, involving 'ukuleles. And tuning does make a difference: you can't play campanela style with a uke tuned to low G.

I've given a few workshops in the past year and it's great to see the numbers of people excited about making music with their 'ukuleles. None of them seem too interested in learning the campanela style of

playing, but they do express their appreciation for how beautiful it sounds. The truth is it's a crazy way to play the uke; ease of execution is all but sacrificed, subordinated to whatever it takes to get that shimmering, harplike sound. It works for me, because when I play it that way, the 'ukulele sings. It may not work for you, but unless you try, you'll never know. At the 'Ukulele Guild of Hawai'i Exhibition and Conference in Waikiki last November, someone was interested in buying one of my collections of uke music, but after attending my workshop she was worried it might be too difficult for her. "No, no, you should try it," I assured her. "It's easy."



JOHN KING teaches guitar at Eckerd College in St. Petersburg, Fla. He is a member of the 'Ukulele Guild of Hawai'i and the board of directors of the 'Ukulele Hall of Fame Museum. His CDs of Bach and the music of Hawai'i's royal family have been featured on National Public Radio. King has authored two collections of 'ukulele music, published by Mel Bay and Hal Leonard, and is co-authoring a scholarly history of 'ukulele for the University of Hawai'i Press.

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