

AJ LEONARD

Bio (full-length)

Multi instrumentalist, arranger and recording artist **A.J. Leonard** is one of Australia's pioneer ukulele players. Feted and respected in Hawaii, the spiritual home of the instrument, he is highly regarded to be among the best in the world.

One of a multitude of baby boomers, AJ spent his formative years in early sixties America but returned to Australia in time for the British beat invasion and the coming of age of Australian pop and rock. His desire to emulate his heroes led him to trade in his father's tennis racket for a real guitar and was his first step toward self-expression and a future in showbiz. A few years later, an interest in string instruments led him to the mandolin, ukulele and bouzouki, closely followed by the piano. The unique qualities of these instruments were a pipeline to creativity and gave AJ a different slant on songwriting and composition.

The 70's brought performances in folk clubs, theatre restaurants and festivals and 80's, experimentation in electronics and writing music for film. In the 90's AJ returned to acoustic music, including the ukulele, which had spent the last decade alone in its case. However it was a trip to Hawaii in 2006 that provided the turning point and a rediscovery of the humblest of instruments.

The ukulele became the centrepiece of his muse, the key that unlocked the doors of creativity. AJ was able to use his ability as a writer to express something uniquely as his own. His lifelong interest in nostalgia and Tin Pan Alley mixed with a more serious classicism has combined to produce an unequalled versatility and a place in ukulele hierarchy.

The ukulele has had three golden ages and the one thing they all have in common is new technology. The Twenties had radio, the Fifties, television and the Noughties, the internet. But the ukulele has never been more important than it is now even if you just look at its worldwide appeal. It is finally shaking off its stigma as a second-rate instrument or figure of fun. As is the guitar, mandolin and fiddle, the ukulele is a traditional folk instrument with its origins grounded in local culture. *"I strongly identify with the music of Hawaii where the ukulele has never been a novelty. Hawaii has produced many great players to whom I owe a debt of gratitude."* (ABC interview) Such inspiration sowed the seeds for debut album *Tales From the Tropics* (2009) where the Ohta-San inspired instrumental *Makawao* sits alongside Beach Boys style harmonies in *Away From It All*. This album has been described, as *"a wonderful album with a therapeutic feel to it and every song is a delight to listen to."* (Trad & Now) The sequel *More Tales From The Tropics* (2010) features AJ's most covered song *Under The Maui Moon*.

Although already an accomplished guitar player, AJ was fortunate to learn techniques and an appreciation for the ukulele from a veteran of the Tin Pan Alley era. This helped lay the foundation for *Blue Heaven* (2010), an album featuring 20's and 30's swing & standards. AJ has put his unique stamp on this genre and this recording has become a firm favourite for nostalgia devotees. *"I really like this rendition of Cole Porter's Night & Day. It sounds ethereal and somewhat mysterious. Well done"* (Ukulele Player Magazine)

The duo with classically trained cellist **Jenny Rowlands** is a result of an appreciation for classical and film music. They have performed and conducted workshops at major festivals and ukulele retreats across Australia and the USA. Together they have developed a rapport, becoming known for their ukulele/cello interplay.

AJ's partnership with **David Billings** came about through a mutual love of original popular song and Hawaiian music. Together they have produced *American Songbook* (2010) and *Australian Songbook* (2012). *"A.J. Leonard and David Billings have produced a great collection of songs from Americana...beautifully played with excellent vocals...they have arranged an intricate tapestry of music. I'd love to see international recognition for this duo."* (Ukulele Player Magazine) **A.J. Leonard's Tropical Lounge** was formed in 2009 with **David Billings**, **Jenny Rowlands** and multi-instrumentalist vocalist **Wendy Rowlands**. Their unique blend of ukuleles, strings, vocal harmonies and percussion has been popular at major music festivals.

"My number one hobby is listening to music and I've always wanted to produce music that other people can enjoy. I've gained a greater appreciation of the past especially in regards to music and its influence on me as a writer and arranger and of course the ukulele draws it all together." (ABC interview) One such musical genre AJ is newly passionate about is Exotica. Three years of listening and planning culminated in the release *Pacifica* (2012). *"I loved it...AJ really did a wonderful job on all the songs. In addition to the instrumental segments I think his vocal quality is very special - warm, inviting and with just the right touch of melancholy."* (Randy Starr -songwriter for Elvis Presley) In order to perform material from *Pacifica* a septet called **Ozotica** has been assembled adding drums, percussion, vibes, guitar and extra vocals to the **Tropical Lounge** lineup.

Image projection is the latest addition to live performances and the history of the ukulele theme concert presentation, *In A Little Hula Heaven*. *"I found myself captivated by this ripping yarn of fact and fantasy punctuated by moments of beauty and humour"* (Steve Barnes Artistic Director Folkworld Fairbridge Festival)

Since 2009 AJ has been busy touring and recording. With another four albums already in the planning stages, there is no sign of any let up from Australia's number one authority on the ukulele.