



© 2014  
by Peter Berryman  
archived at louandpeter.com

## Ukulele Miscellany

It's another winter day as I type this. Sunny, but snow everywhere and it's cold out there too. Nice weather to sit in a cozy room and play tropical tunes on my big warm guitar. Though it would be nicer, I'm thinking, if I still had my original baritone ukulele to strum with that old grey felt flat pick of yore. Only Dick Dale's surf guitar could equal the uke's evocation of waves on sunny beaches.

I know I've mentioned this before, but my first stringed instrument was a baritone uke, which I bought from one of my high school sweethearts for, I think, twenty dollars, a fortune in 1964 or so. According to the Google calculator, a dollar in 1964 was worth 7.67 in today's (2014) money. My gawd, that's \$150! Where did I get that kind of money? But it was worth every penny, and every day from then on it was in my arms, which is more than I can say for my high school sweetheart. I don't know what ever became of that instrument, but then I don't know what ever became of my high school sweetheart either.

The baritone uke, for me, was the perfect instrument for transitioning from NO instrument to my eventual guitar. Unlike the smaller and more common soprano ukulele, the baritone uke's four strings are tuned just like the top four strings of a guitar, so in learning baritone uke chords you are well on your way to learning guitar chords. And the strings are nylon, so are easy to squish down. You can make a working capo for it with a pencil and a rubber band. I even taught myself the finger-picking style of playing an alternating bass with the thumb, on the bottom two strings, while picking out the melody on the top two with various remaining fingers, a style I use almost exclusively to this day.

With cabin fever thoughts of warm ocean breezes, following are a few balmy tidbits about the ukulele.

Sometimes you'll see ukulele spelled "ukelele," and I've heard that referred to as the *British spelling*, just like I've heard

that "accordion" is the *British spelling* of "accordion." I think *British spelling* is a euphemism for *misspelling*.

The word is most commonly pronounced "you-kuh-LAY-lee" on the mainland, but the original Hawaiian is apparently more like "oo-ke le-le." Arthur Godfrey, famous uke player, pronounced it the Hawaiian way but spelled it the British way. Here's a YouTube (audio only) of Arthur playing "Ukelele Song:"

<http://youtu.be/ANDENTpHG0>

Thanks to the *Everything Hawaiian* craze of the 1920's, I am quoting, below, supposed reminiscences of Hawaii's first ukulele player, Joao Fernandes, as printed in the ALPHA PHI Quarterly of January 1922. There are a number of versions of this story; this is purported to be Joao himself speaking:

*"Forty-three years ago from Madeira I came to Hawaii on the good ship Ravenscraig on a voyage around Cape Horn. We sail four months and twenty-two days. The Ravenscraig brought 350 immigrants from Portugal to work in cane fields. I had with me a ukulele, my wife, and my six-months-old baby. On August 22, 1879, we land in Honolulu and on that day the ukulele I play in Hawaii for the first time. Everybody laugh at funny little fiddle and I must play it all the time to please curiosity. ...Often for King Kalakaua I played, for Queen Emma, and for Queen Liliuokalani. ...*

*"One such grand time that was! Everybody was happy in those days, everybody except my wife. She no like ukulele because I stay out all night, serenading or playing for dances and luaus. ...My wife and I had many hot words.*

*"To save us from fighting, at last I locked my ukulele in the bottom of a trunk. It stay locked ten years. Then my boy get it and break it to pieces. Too bad. I no play now. My fingers all stiff. ...Manuel Nunes, another Portuguese, then had a furniture factory on King Street near old fish market. Manuel, he stop making furniture and made only ukuleles. I stop by his shop and he'd hand me a ukulele. Then I play and the Hawaiian boys would come from everywhere to listen. I play a bit, then somebody give Manuel five dollars for the ukulele and Manuel hand me another one until somebody buy that, and so on. He could not make them fast*

*enough. Hawaiian boys forget everything when they hear ukulele. They rather play than eat. I no musician, but oh, how I did love to play. Do you think Hawaii liked my music?"*

Many performers -- besides yours truly -- got their start on the ukulele.

*"At age seven I was given a ukulele, and I've been into fretted instruments ever since then." -- Pete Seeger*

*"My dad had a four-string tenor guitar that he tuned like a ukulele and between that AND the ukulele I began to really pick up a chord sense because three notes make a chord and the fourth one adds a kind of a color and I think that's really sustained me through my musical life." --Noel Paul Stookey*

*"My first was this little plastic Arthur Godfrey ukulele, then I seem to remember a baritone 'uke', then I had a banjo." -- Neil Young*

Wisconsin wasn't immune to the ukulele craze in the teens and 20s of the last century, 40 years before my ukulele debut. I have a 1920 ad from Junction Music Shop in Racine, advertising a ukulele and accessories, including case and instruction book, for \$6.00.

And in a column called **On The Spur of the Moment** by Roy K. Moulton, in the **Janesville Daily Gazette** of October 3, 1916, there appears this poem by "A.D.S." called **The Ukulele Band**:

*When your feet begin a itchin'  
And your shoulders start a twitchin'  
And across the ballroom floor you  
glide a feelin' gay and grand;  
You begin to weave and totter  
Like a boat upon the water  
And you listen to the music of the  
ukulele band.*

*All your being seems to quiver  
Like the ripples on a river,  
And the perspiration oozes from  
the hollow of your hand;  
You can love most any girl  
As you glide and dip and whirl,  
If you're dancing to the music of  
the ukulele band.*

So let's hear some beach style plunking, you Ukers. Remind us that there are dunes below these drifts.

--WZ, Mar 2014