

Music Matters

Music and music makers.

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The Ukulele

A Tribute to the "Jumping Flea"

The ukulele is perhaps Hawaii's most popular musical instrument. Often seen as a toy, it has been taken seriously by many - from King Kalakaua and the Waikiki Beach Boys to Don Ho and Tiny Tim. It is the perfect instrument to feature during our Hawaiian [Theme of the Month](#).

This activity includes a brief history of the ukulele and some ukulele music for your listening pleasure.

Props and Preparations:

For the listening part of the activity, download the following carousel music:

- "The World is Waiting for the Sunrise" ~ Squeeze Kamana 🎵
- "Lei Aloha" ~ Chick Daniels 🎵
- "Ukulele Lady" ~ Duke Kamoku 🎵
- "Tiny Bubbles" ~ Ukulele Ray 🎵
- "Hello! Ma Baby" 🎵

Bring in a ukulele to pass around during the activity. Check with staff and the music department at your local school.

In addition, check out the links below for additional information and some great YouTube videos that you might want to show during the activity.



What is a Ukulele?

A ukulele (called uke for short) is a stringed instrument categorized as part of the guitar family. Although it looks very much like a guitar, a typical ukulele has only 4 strings, whereas the traditional guitar has 6 strings.

Modern ukuleles come in 4 sizes: soprano (or standard), concert, tenor, and baritone. The smallest, the soprano ukulele, is what most people think of when they think of a uke. They are around 21" long, cute,



portable, and fun to play. The next largest size is the concert uke. At 23", they are just a bit bigger with a bigger sound. There are also tenor and baritone ukuleles, which, at 26" and 30", are more like small 4-stringed guitars. They sound a bit like ukuleles and a bit like guitars. By far, the most popular size in Hawaii today is the tenor.

How did the ukulele become associated with Hawaiian culture?

As the Legend Goes...

On August 23, 1879, the *Ravenscrag* (a British ship) arrived in Honolulu. The ship brought 419 Portuguese immigrants from the island of Madeira to work in the sugar cane fields on the islands. It had been a long, hard journey of over 4 months and some 15,000 miles. In celebration of their arrival, [Joao Fernandes](#) (a 15th century Portuguese explorer) borrowed a friend's [braguinha](#) (a small Portuguese guitar), jumped off the ship, and right there on the wharf started playing folk songs from his native land. The Hawaiians were amazed at the speed of his fingers as they danced across the fingerboard. The Hawaiians called the instrument "ukulele," meaning "jumping flea" in English.

"Kinging" the Ukulele

Within 10 years, anybody who was anybody owned a ukulele in Hawaii. This was attributed to Joao Fernandes, the original fellow who jumped off the boat playing his hometown folk songs. As the story goes, Fernandes spent so much of his time walking around Honolulu playing his ukulele that his wife complained. The Hawaiians became not only listeners, but students as well. The ukulele was easy to learn and very portable.



[King David Kalakaua](#) (1836-1891) fell in love with the ukulele and learned to play it. Fernandes and his friends were often invited to the king's bungalow for drinks, food, dancing, and of course, live ukulele jam sessions. (King Kalakaua was known as the "Merrie Monarch.")

Along with King Kalakaua, Hawaiian queens, princesses, and princes learned to play the instrument. With such royal involvement, the people inevitably accepted the ukulele.

A Hawaiian Household Instrument

Special wood-cutting and wood-shaping machines were developed to make ukuleles. But it required many hours of concentrated work, all done by hand. By 1910, more modern equipment made instrument makers' jobs easier. During this time, a ukulele cost anywhere from \$3 to \$5, which was almost an entire month's pay for the average Hawaiian! Those who could not afford a ukulele made their own out of coconut shell halves, cigar boxes, and other creative material.

Today, you can buy a ukulele for as little as \$30. However, a top-of-the-line, customized ukulele can go for thousands of dollars.

The Waikiki Beach Boys

No group symbolized the Hawaiian lifestyle and ukulele music quite like the Waikiki Beach Boys. These men lived and worked as entertainers on the beach at Waikiki from the early part of the 20th century to the present day, but their prime was in the 1920s and 1930s.



Members of the group changed over the years, but many of them were excellent musicians and composers. They included such names as Melvin Paoa, Squeeze Kamana, Pua Kealoha, Chick Daniels, and Splash and Freckles Lyons.

Legendary Beach Boy parties were held in the 1920s at the Moana Pier (which jutted out from the beach at the Moana Hotel). From sunrise to sundown, the Beach Boys strummed their ukuleles and sang Hawaiian songs.

Fame and Fortune

The most extraordinary Waikiki beach boy was Squeeze Kamana. He was trained at a music school in St. Louis. When he returned to Hawaii, he became a member of [Al Kealoha Perry and the Singing Surfriders](#). Squeeze, being an incredible soloist, could finger chords on the ukulele with his left hand cupped from above as well as below the neck of the instrument. On occasion, he even played his ukulele behind his head. What a showoff!

Chick Daniels was the head of the Beach Boys group at the Royal Hawaiian Hotel for over 50 years. He not only performed in Hawaii, but also in Hollywood and on [Arthur Godfrey's](#) radio show in New York. Chick was renowned for his "pants-dropping" hula. He would get up and dance to a quick Hawaiian tune, and at the end, he would drop his pants (usually wearing underwear, but one time he forgot he had no underwear on)!

(Tip: If you want, pause here and play "The World is Waiting for the Sunrise" [featuring Squeeze Kamana] and "Lei Aloha" [by Chick Daniels] above.)

The Ukulele Today in Hawaii and the Mainland

Today, we are seeing the beginning of another ukulele boom. In Hawaii, instrument makers are once again making more and more ukuleles. [The Ukulele Festival](#), held in July in Kapiolani Park in Honolulu, is in its 28th year and features many of the world's great players. Mainland ukulele events, such as the Northern California Ukulele Festival and the Uke Expo in Massachusetts, draw hundreds of people.

Quirky Uke Facts

- George Harrison gave Paul McCartney a ukulele – the very one that Paul used to play the Harrison-penned tune "Something" at a memorial concert in San Francisco for the former Beatle. Paul McCartney once said, "To this day, if I ever meet grownups who play ukulele, I love 'em."
- Much of the instrument's popularity was cultivated via [The Arthur Godfrey Show](#) (1949-1957) on television. Godfrey played the ukulele, and some say he single-handedly powered the market for the instrument.
- [Don Ho](#) also played the ukulele. You might recall his most famous song, "Tiny Bubbles." What other [Don Ho Songs](#) do you recall?
- Other famous people who play/played the ukulele include Elvis Presley, Adam Sandler, [William H. Macy](#), Warren Buffet, and Steve Martin.
- While the mainstream American English pronunciation of "ukulele" is (yoo-kuh-ley-lee), some prefer to follow the original Hawaiian pronunciation (oo-koo-ley-ley).
- If you're looking to buy a ukulele in London, there's only one real option - [Duke of Uke](#).
- The ukulele is usually tuned in the chord of C6, which is G-C-E-A from low to high. Incidentally, this is known as the "my dog has fleas" tuning.
- When the strings are new, the ukulele cannot hold a tune for more than a few seconds. It can take up to two weeks for new strings to stretch out and hold a tune - at any rate, longer than it takes for the dog to get rid of its fleas!



Famous Ukulele Songs

There are certain songs that will be forever associated with the ukulele.

"Tonight You Belong to Me" was written in 1926, the heyday of the ukulele, but it wasn't until the song was used in the film [The Jerk](#) that it became almost exclusively associated with the ukulele.

["Aloha 'Oe"](#) is one of the oldest ukulele songs. It was written by the Hawaiian Queen Lili'uokalani at the end of the 19th century (1877). The song was originally a love song but has become a farewell song because of its vocal refrain (aloha 'oe means "farewell to you"). The song has recently become popular with children after being used in the cartoon [Lilo and Stitch](#).

["Ukulele Lady"](#) was written in 1925 and became all the rage in Hawaii and beyond.

Singer-musician [Tiny Tim](#) became closely associated with the ukulele after playing it on his 1968 hit "Tiptoe Through the Tulips." With his unconventional appearance and strange, warbling voice, he wasn't the greatest ambassador for the ukulele. (*Tip: [Watch Tiny Tim](#) play "Tiptoe Through the Tulips" on Rowan & Martin's Laugh-In. It's hysterical!*)



"Somewhere Over the Rainbow," written in 1939, has become a ukulele staple due to a [performance by Israel Kamakawiwo'ole](#).

Other songs you will often hear on the ukulele include "Five Foot Two, Eyes of Blue," "Ain't She Sweet," and "Hello! Ma Baby."

Listening to the Ukulele

Play the songs above and listen for the ukulele music.

Related Activities

1. Play some [Don Ho Songs](#). See our [Who Am I?](#) page for more about Don Ho (born August 13, 1930).
2. Play the song "Tiny Bubbles" and have a sing-along or blow some bubbles while listening. If you have musically inclined people and a ukulele available, see if they will try to play the songs with [these chords](#).
3. Pick up a copy of [The Ukulele - 2nd Edition a Visual History](#).
4. Take the [Ukumania Quiz](#).
5. Feature Hawaiian music all month long. Some songs include: "Blue Hawaii," "Hawaiian Wedding Song," "My Little Grass Shack," and ["Theme from Hawaii Five-O."](#)


Sites to See

- [All About Ukulele](#)
- [Top 50 Ukulele Websites](#)
- [YouTube George Harrison Tribute Concert with Ukulele Ray](#)
- [Ukulele Hall of Fame](#)
- [Pineapple Pete's School of Ukulele](#)
- [Ukulele Musicians](#)
- [Hawaiian Music Hall of Fame](#)

More August Music

- [Exercise & Healthy Living](#) - "Hukilau Song"
- [Activities for the Soul](#) - "We Will Understand It Better By and By" and "Wonderful Words of Life"
- [Another Year Younger](#) - Funny birthday lyrics to "Row, Row, Row Your Boat"

To Download the Music

Right click on the  next to the song and select "save link target as" or "save target as" on your menu. Save the file to a location on your computer. Then, burn the music to a CD and you are ready to go.
