

## MUSIC



Andy Andrews, instrument in hand, appears at the monthly ukedown at Bocci's.

BILL LOVEJOY/SENTINEL

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# Fountain of Uke

*Clubs & Associations - 2009*  
The Ukulele Club of Santa Cruz has turned a once laughed-at musical instrument into a tool to build community

By WALLACE BAINE

wbaine@santacruzsentinel.com

Santa Cruz has yet to declare an Official Musical Instrument. And while the guitar has always been the even-money favorite — considering one of the world's most respected high-end acoustic guitars goes by the brand name "Santa Cruz" — there is an intriguing dark horse coming up strong on the outside: the ukulele.

Once a punch line, the "uke" has now become a powerhouse instrument, and nowhere it is more popular than in Santa Cruz. In fact, an anthropologist looking for a quick way into the uniquely free-spirited culture of Santa Cruz only has to circle the third (sometimes fourth) Thursday of the month on his calendar. That's the day of the monthly meeting of the Ukulele Club of Santa Cruz, a group of give-or-take 200 colorfully dressed locals who've made the uke a tool for instant community-building — which, to these folks, is just a fancy word for good clean fun.

The Uke Club began back in 2000 when uke lovers

## IF YOU GO

THE UKULELE CLUB  
OF SANTA CRUZ

**WHEN:** 7 p.m. tonight

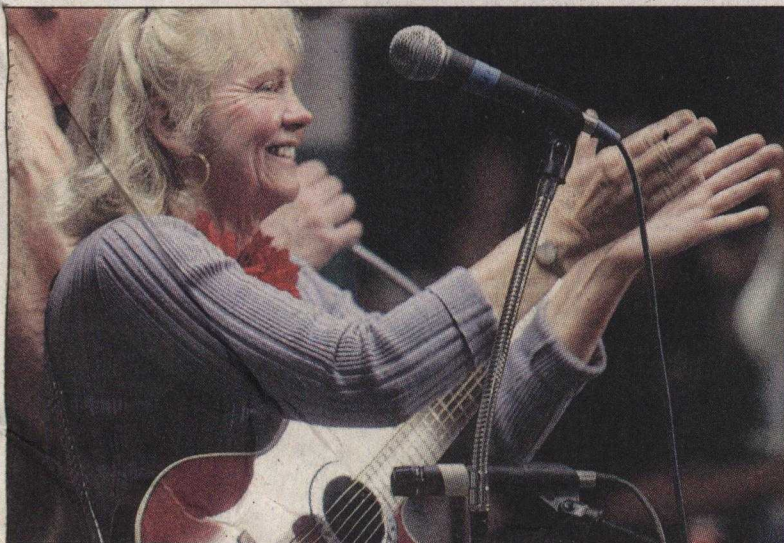
**WHERE:** Bocci's Cellar, 140 Encinal St., Santa Cruz

**NOTE:** A workshop with guest musician Derick Sebastian will take place from 4:15 to 5:30 p.m. The fee is \$20, which includes a free instructional DVD.

**DETAILS:** ukuleleclub.com

Andy Andrews and Peter Thomas started a club dedicated to jamming together on the tiny Hawaiian instrument. The first meetings were

SEE UKULELE ON C2



BILL LOVEJOY/SENTINEL

Carol Merrill responds to the audience at the monthly gathering of uke players after her performance.







BILL LOVEJOY/SENTINEL

Uke lovers congregate at Bocci's monthly for music and libations.

## UKULELE

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at Thomas's house, but eventually the club found a simpatico home at Bocci's Cellar in Santa Cruz. Since its beginnings, Andrews and Thomas have remained as pied pipers of the club, providing much of the daffy energy that characterizes the club's racuous meetings.

Still, said Andrews, the focus is not on performance, but on participation. The key to the Hawaiian ukulele's enduring popularity is its relative accessibility for musical newbies. One club meeting and someone who's never picked up a uke before can come away with a decent competence with two or three songs.

"What's that line in 'Home on the Range'?—'Never is heard a discouraging word'? That's the way it is at our meetings. There is no 'pro section' and no 'amateur section.' Everybody's just playing together."

A typical meeting at Boc-

ci's is packed with smiling uke kooks, many in aloha shirts, and the ratio of ukes to people is close to 1:1. Andrews and Thomas lead the activities by frantically handing out song sheets and yelling out instructions. Volunteers act as the "Chordettes," who, at the appropriate point in each song, hold up enormous cardboard signs on which are drawn chord diagrams.

The club operates on an ethic that music is meant to be shared communally rather than as a gift from a single performer to an attentive audience.

"The musicians that come," said Andy Andrews, "many of them the very best musicians, they'll be incredibly generous in showing people how to do things on the ukulele."

Santa Cruz is also a key stop on the ukulele performer circuit — from the Hawaiian musicians of the Santa Cruz-based Dancing Cat label, to young hot shot Jake Shimabukuro, to 101-year-old legend Bill Tapia. As a result, the club often gets big-name guests from

local virtuoso Bob Brozman to frequent visitors Cyril Pahinui and George Kahumoku to sit in for a jam session or two.

As clubs go, the Uke Club is a rather loose confederacy of crazies. It's a club with no invitations or club dues. "There are no rules at the Uke Club," said original member Vince Tuzzi. "If you show up and play with us two times, you're a member."

In this respect, the Ukulele Club reflects that ineffable spirit found in Hawaii that goes by the name "aloha."

"Clubs are always talking about 'exclusivity,'" said Andrews. "Well, we have a theme of inclusivity. We have people who come to the club, who've come for years now, and it gets to the point where you have this revelation. Making music with your friends is infinitely more pleasurable than watching someone else play music, no matter how good they are. What's that saying? 'Happiness self-made is music self-played.'"