

Ukulele Club ready for its close-up

Clubs + Organization - 2000

5.19.11

By WALLACE BAINE

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Among the many icons that symbolize life, love and passion in Santa Cruz County – the surfboard, the redwood tree, the protest sign, the tie-dye T-shirt – let us not forget the humble ukulele.

The beloved little second cousin to the guitar has long been associated with Hawaii, but it has found a hospitable home in Santa Cruz, thanks primarily to the Ukulele Club of Santa Cruz County, a broad collection of oddballs and misfits who find in the uke not only an instrument for making music, but for creating community as well.

Filmmaker Nina Koocher certainly didn't need to be sold on the appeal of the strangely strong bond



NINA KOOCHER/CONTRIBUTED PHOTO

Sandor Nagyszalanczy, left, and Andy Andrews, two of the driving forces of the Ukulele Club of Santa Cruz County croon for the crowd in 'Boardwalk.'

between Santa Cruz and the uke. After one visit to the Uke Club's rollicking monthly meetings at Bocci's Cellars, she knew what her next film project was going

to be. That first time, she saw 97-year-old Hawaiian uke master Bill Tapia stop by for a visit and a per-

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formance, along with a handful of pre-teen ukulele-ists.

"I went with my friend Lynn Swanger who was a part of the Ukulele Club," said Koocher, remembering her first encounter with uke-mania. "And she had suggested to me that the Ukulele Club would make a great subject of film. So, I went with her and the spirit of the club was just so dynamic and appealing, I got it immediately."

Now, six years after that first visit Koocher will premiere her new film on the Uke Club titled "Under the Boardwalk" at the Rio Theatre on Tuesday.

At the center of the film is, of course, the ukulele, the small four-stringed instrument often historically associated in pop culture with Arthur Godfrey and Tiny Tim. In fact, the uke is a touchstone of Hawaiian music and Koocher's film traces how the uke grew in popularity following the Pan-Pacific Exposition in San Francisco a century ago. To give that perspective, Koocher brought in the late Santa Cruz writer and Hawaii-lover James Houston.

But soon the story of the ukulele morphs into the story of an eccentric group of Santa Cruzans whose love for the uke became the center of a thriving social community.

"I've always felt that this is as much a film about Santa Cruz as it is about ukuleles," said Koocher, whose first film "How Much to Remember" addressed the long memory of the Holocaust and its effect on younger generations. "What we're documenting really is the convergence of these two entities: the ukulele and Santa Cruz."

Primary among those Santa Cruz uke-aholics is Peter Thomas and Andy Andrews, the founders of the group who, with the help of such friends as Sandor Nagyszalanczy,

IF YOU GO

'UNDER THE BOARDWALK: A UKULELE LOVE STORY'

DIRECTED BY: Nina Koocher

WHEN: Tuesday, 7:30 p.m.

WHERE: The Rio Theatre, 1205 Soquel Ave., Santa Cruz

COST: \$10 advance; \$12 at the door

DETAILS: www.riotheatre.com or www.ninakoocherfilms.com

Jayme Kelly Curtis and Patti Maxine, turned the monthly club meetings into an entertaining mix of performance and participatory music making. The film also spends time with uke collectors such as Andrews, Nagyszalanczy and Rick McKee, aka "Ukulele Dick," one of the Club's chief inspirations.

In the midst of Koocher's filming, the Club lost one of its most valued members, Geno Galli, who died three years from cancer at the age of 57. "Under the Boardwalk" takes a poignant turn by documenting the paddle-out at Capitola Beach in Galli's name. It was Galli who was one of the instrumental people involved in Burning Uke, an annual Big Sur campout event in which a gigantic ukulele, built by Galli, was burned. "It's like Burning Man for old guys too lazy to drive to the desert," said Andrews.

"I really want to capture the creativity and the remarkable spirit of people who live here," said Koocher, "and the Uke Club lets me do that. And though there is a sense of sadness in the film, it gives us a way to understand how to build community through music in the same way church builds community, but in a more secular way in this case."

Koocher said that the film will be preceded by a live Uke Club jam, and will be followed by a short Q&A period.