

# UKE CITY

Santa Cruz has become the cultural epicenter for the unlikely revival of the once-ridiculed ukulele.

By Wallace Baine

**S**anta Cruz has yet to declare an official musical instrument. The guitar has always been the even-money favorite – one of the world's most respected high-end acoustic guitars is a Santa Cruz – but an intriguing dark horse is coming up strong on the outside: the ukulele.

Once a punch line, the “uke” has now become a powerhouse instrument, and nowhere is it more popular than in Santa Cruz. In fact, an anthropologist looking for a quick way into the free-spirited culture of Santa Cruz can simply circle the third Thursday of any month on his calendar. That's the day the Ukulele Club of Santa Cruz meets. The 200 or so colorfully dressed members have made the uke a tool for instant community-building, which to them is just a fancy word for good clean fun.

Uke lovers Andy Andrews and Peter Thomas formed the club, dedicated to jamming together on the tiny Hawaiian instrument, back in 2000. The first meetings were at Thomas's house, but eventually the club found a simpatico home at Bocci's Cellar in Santa Cruz. Andrews and Thomas remain the pied pipers of the club, providing much of the daffy energy that characterizes the club's raucous meetings.

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

“What's that line in ‘Home on the Range?’” Andrews asks. “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 Bocci'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 “Chord-ettes.” At the appropriate point in each song, they hold up enormous cardboard signs on which are drawn chord diagrams.

The club operates on the ethic that music is meant to be shared communally rather than presented as a gift from a single

(Above) Peter and Andy of the Santa Cruz Ukulele Club jam together on Cowell beach.

photo: Shmuel Thaler



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photo: Bill Lovejoy

After her performance Carol Merrill responds to the audience at Bocci's gathering of uke players.

performer to an attentive audience.

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

Santa Cruz is a key stop on the ukulele circuit, drawing performers from Hawaiian musicians on the Santa Cruz-based Dancing Cat label to young hot shot Jake Shimabukuro and 101-year-old legend Bill Tapia. As a result, the Uke Club often gets big-name guests too. Local virtuoso Bob Brozman often sits in for a jam session or two, as do frequent visitors Cyril Pahinui and George Kahumoku.

As clubs go, the Uke Club is a rather loose confederacy of crazies. There are no invitations or club dues.

"There are no rules at the Uke Club," says 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 the ineffable "aloha spirit" of Hawaii.

"Clubs are always talking about 'exclusivity,'" says 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.'" ■

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Sandor Nogyszalanczy, one of the founders of Santa Cruz Ukulele club, in his studio with his collection of ukuleles.