

Entertainment and Events

SKYLINE

Four strings, four fingers

Ukulele fun is making a comeback

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Strings, frets, strumming. A plunky sound. A miniscule frame. If you didn't know better, you might think you were looking at a little guitar.

But they are not little guitars.

They are ukuleles, and they make people smile.

Especially people who are learning how to play them.

That's where Tonya Dale comes in.

Dale is a ukulele enthusiast. And after spending a few hours with her new ukulele club, some might call her a ukulele fanatic.

That is fine with her. She readily admits that she loves those little things, which is why she started the club.

And in just two sessions, the class has grown from two attendees to 11.

For Dale, the focus is on fun.

She has been playing only about three years, she said, but in that time she has learned enough to know there are no rules with the ukulele.

"It's a very approachable instrument," she said. "I flunked tonette (a recorder-like instrument) in school and did poorly in my music classes. But with ukulele, you can do it."

The can-do attitude is what the club is all about, and within two hours, the class learned a handful of easy chords and ran through four tunes.

And even if first-timers don't have the tunes mastered right away, Dale has a few tricks that will keep players plunking along no matter where everyone else is in the song.

"If you get lost, then just put your hands over the strings, mute them and strum along," she said. "You turn into a percussion section."

She has used that trick many times herself during jam sessions, she said.

That's the beauty of ukulele, she said. You don't have to be a master of the instrument to have fun with it. People who have been playing for a long time don't care if beginners know how to play. They just want people to have fun.

The not-so-subtle theme here is "fun."

"I like to say that I play poorly, but I do it with great enthusiasm," she said.

And with her infectious enthusiasm guiding the class, everyone was strumming along to some of the happiest music ever made.

That is the other thing she likes about the instrument. It has a naturally mellow and happy sound.

It's no wonder the instruments inspire jam circles at ukulele festivals all around America.

She encouraged class members to bring songs

they would like to play and directed them toward Ukulele.org for a list of songs in the public domain.

But she also encourages players to start a book of their own favorite songs, be they traditional like "Doggie in the Window" or modern tunes like Beatles or Pearl Jam songs.

She said she has heard some of the great ukulele players perform jazz, rock, easy listening and all different kinds of music on the instrument.

"It's not just for Hawaiian music," she said.

Dale said she learned how to play from the Internet and always enjoys picking new things up from other players.

Part of the charm of the instrument and the music is its simplicity, which is a nice change from the "hyper-produced" music of the modern age.

Nita Harris said it is great that Dale came up with the ukulele club idea because it is more fun to play the instrument with a group of people.

"It makes a big difference," Harris said. "It's nice of Tonya to do this. People charge for these kind of lessons. It's generous for her to share her knowledge like this."

Harry Mortensen recently relocated to Cherokee, but that didn't keep him from coming back to Paradise to join the fun.

He said he likes the ukulele because it is easy to play. "It's made to play chords," he said.

Jack Montgomery said he always loved Hawaiian music and likes the instrument because of its portability.

Additionally, as a beginner, he enjoyed Dale's easygoing instruction style.

At the end of the class, she played "Somewhere Over the Rainbow/What a Wonderful World," the popular medley from acclaimed Hawaiian artist Israel Kamakawiwo'ole to show what can be done with the tiny instrument.

The tune has been featured in movies and on TV commercials and is arguably the most recognizable ukulele music in recent memory, aside from Tiny Tim's "Tiptoe Through the Tulips."

The next meeting is on July 13, and there will be a limited number of extra ukuleles available.

The meetings are at Cedar Creek Publishing Co., 5921 Clark Road, in Paradise at 6:30 p.m.

The lessons are free (and fun).

"Come join us," Dale said.



Top right, Harry Mortensen and Vince Alaimo sing and play along on their ukuleles during Tonya Dale's ukulele class. Anyone can participate in the class which is about having fun. Center right, Jack Montgomery practices his strumming. Right, Dale uses a chart to help instruct new ukulele players on how to make a chord.