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Two tickets to Paradise

A CN&R intern takes a short journey to try her hand at the ukulele

By [Toni Scott](#)

A town of 26,000 nestled among the pines seems an unlikely location to experience the tropical atmosphere of a Hawaiian vacation. The first time I heard the sounds of a ukulele playing, I'd taken a six-hour plane flight to Hawaii. But recently, I simply had to drive 20 minutes to Paradise to visit a church off Scottwood Road, where the sounds of numerous ukuleles brought me right back to the island.

Instead of feeling relaxed on a beach sipping Mai Tais, I felt the same anxiety and trepidation I did trying to stand on that longboard for just 30 seconds during my Hawaiian surfing lesson. Because that night was not just about listening to the sounds of a ukulele, it was about making them myself.

I was about to learn how to play a small, four-stringed instrument in a mere 30 minutes with Tonya Dale, organizer of Ukuleles of Paradise, a group of about 10 individuals who meet once a month to strum and pluck the ukulele. My introduction was to take place during the first half-hour of the meeting. After my lesson, I would be able to participate in the "jam session" that the members truly come for.

Dale assured me in a phone conversation the day before that learning the instrument would be simple and fun. I thought she was horribly mistaken. My only experience with any musical instrument prior to this was trying to reenact the scene from *Big* with the floor piano when I went into FAO Schwarz in New York City. In fact, I couldn't carry a tune to save my



HOLD THAT C

CN&R intern Toni Scott gets a uke lesson from the "Ukalady."

Photo By Andrew Boost

[Ukuleles of Paradise](#)

Do you uke?

Ukuleles of Paradise meets on the second Thursday of the month at the Craig Memorial Congregational Church. 6:30 p.m. beginner lesson, 7 p.m. group session. More info: www.UkuleleTonya.com

Craig Memorial Congregational Church
5665 Scottwood Road, Paradise

life. But still I went to the lesson with the hope of leaving with some shred of respect and dignity.

I was the second person to arrive at the Craig Memorial Congregational Church. The doors were still closed. A man, one of several clad in Hawaiian-print shirts, smiled and introduced himself, saying Dale usually showed up about this time. It wasn't long before a small convertible drove up to the building, with a personalized license plate reading "UKALADY." Out stepped Tonya Dale, a middle-aged woman with short brown hair wearing a black dress with gold and green ferns printed on it. She enthusiastically introduced herself and quickly got down to the business of tuning my instrument.

Dale, who started Ukuleles of Paradise about a year ago, first became enamored with the instrument during a visit to Maui. The resort she stayed in offered a free lesson to guests, and she gave it a try.

"I'd always been entranced with the look of a ukulele, so I opted to take the lesson instead of snorkeling that morning at Ulua Beach," Dale explains on her Web site.

A former editor at The Paradise Post, Dale said she fell in love with the ukulele after one lesson. She reminded me numerous times how much fun I would have. "Plus, when you play with others you really improve your skills a lot," Dale assured me.



PLAYING THE FLEA

The Ukuleles of Paradise gather around the music stand. Right: Tonya Dale takes ukuleles seriously.

Photo By Andrew Boost

The rest of the group, which slowly filtered into the building, consisted of men and women from a wide range of ages, occupations and places of residence—most of them regulars. Hannah Hull, an 11-year-old with golden hair and a toothy grin, smiled across the table at me. If she can do this, I thought, so can I.

In the corner of the conference room where we congregated, 72-year-old Ray Miller, who owns about 20 ukuleles, showed off his latest purchase—a 1915 antique uke he bought at an auction in Chico. A shade of coffee with just a hint of creamer, the almost 100-year-old instrument looked weathered and was missing two strings, but Miller's face shone with adoration for his new purchase.

In my hands I held a slightly newer ukulele, a loaner from a co-worker. Unlike Miller, my fingers were inexperienced on the neck of the instrument. But that was all about to change.

After introductions, Dale started off with teaching the beginners (in this case, just me and fellow CN&R intern Andrew Boost, who was there taking photos) the basic ukulele chords. My fingers awkwardly slid to the C chord and then the F chord that Dale had drawn on the white board at the front of the room. The black dots, drawn in a triangle, looked simple enough in print, but teaching my fingers to actually mimic that position was a bit of a feat. While I could hold my fingers in place and strum, once they left the neck of the ukulele, I forgot how to get them back. I quickly became a fan of the C chord, which required just one finger on one string.

After 10 minutes of strumming whatever notes my fingers could find, Dale said I was ready to play. My opening number: "Clementine." I placed the song sheet in front of me and began to strum along

with the rest of the group. Two chords were all I needed to play the song, and with each new verse, my fingers began to find their place with more ease.

As soon as the music began, it was as if a new energy encompassed the room. People were scattered behind a group of tables arranged in a square—some standing, some sitting, all smiling. Hannah shared a music sheet with her dad as they moved their fingers up and down the necks of their instruments in a similar fashion.

Dale stood at the front of the room, glancing up from her ukulele to give me a reassuring nod every once in a while. It wasn't the Grand Symphony Orchestra, but our blend of amateur voices and sweet-sounding strums wasn't half bad.

By the second time we played the song, I was singing and strumming as if I had been playing for years. At least I pretended. For the rest of the night, each song that we played, I worked my way through. I never quite mastered the chords, but I didn't care. It was simply about being a part of the group. At one point, about six of us took up one side of the room, jamming together to "Five Foot Two."

Surrounded by ukulele players, I felt like I was one of them—minus the Hawaiian shirt. Once we began to play, it didn't matter that I was 22 and had never picked up a ukulele or that Hannah was 11 and had been playing for years.

And no one cared (or noticed) that I was faking the F chord.