

The Duke of Uke

A renowned guitar maker from Clearwater is playing a new tune these days, having gained international fame for making ukuleles. Yes, ukuleles. He's as surprised as you are.

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A renowned guitar maker from Clearwater is playing a new tune these days, having gained international fame for making ukuleles. Yes, ukuleles. He's as surprised as you are.

CLEARWATER -- In his little shop on Drew Street, Augustino LoPrinzi quietly carries on the craft he learned more than a half century ago. He shaves and shapes exotic strips of wood from Italy to India to Brazil into guitars that can cost as much as a new minivan.

Andres Segovia has played a LoPrinzi in concert. Leo Kottke, Dan Fogelberg and Larry Coryell own one. Christopher Parkening just placed an order.

Given his high-profile client list, LoPrinzi was at a loss three years ago when he was asked by his agent to build an instrument for someone named Ohta-san. This virtuoso, whom LoPrinzi had never heard of, didn't want a guitar.

He wanted a ukulele.

"To be honest, the first thing that came to my mind was Tiny Bubbles and Don Ho, and the second thing was Tiny Tim and Tiptoe Through the Tulips," LoPrinzi says.

A renowned ukulele-ist? LoPrinzi always thought of ukuleles as

nice novelties for folks who couldn't play guitar.

But then he learned that Ohta-san had recorded close to 60 albums of jazz, rock, pop, Latin -- even classical -- ukulele. (Bach and Wind Beneath My Wings on ukulele? Yep.) Fans flocked to his concerts in Japan and Hawaii. Now, the artist -- actually a Hawaiian-born musician named Herb Ohta Jr. -- was in the market for a new ukulele.

The Martin Guitar Co., the Cadillac of acoustic guitars, had sent Ohta-san two ukuleles. He sent them back.

"I figured, I'll make him one, but not thinking he'd take it," LoPrinzi says. "I just did it as a favor to my agent."

He studied the Martin models Ohta-san had rejected and concluded they weren't made with the same quality as the company's guitars. He thought he could do better. So he built a wooden mold, cut and bent Koa wood from Hawaii, added intricate pearl inlays and special oil varnish -- and worked with the same loving care and attention to detail he gives his guitars. Three months later, the final product looked like a miniature high-end classical guitar. He sent it so Ohta-san could try it out.

"Guess what?" says LoPrinzi, lowering his voice and drawing closer, as if about to share a great secret. "He plays that uke for the first time in a concert in Japan -- and somebody at the show puts a bid on it, and he sells it. For \$3,000!"

"When I heard this, I said to myself, 'Oh my God, I'm in the wrong end of this business.' "

It turns out, LoPrinzi's end isn't too shabby, either. Now the man known to friends as "Augie" is hailed in Japan as the high priest of ukulele makers. His ukes are carried in stores and pictured in magazine ads and on Ohta-san album covers all over the country. They sell from \$1,200 to \$3,000, but used ones have gone for as

much as \$5,000. (Ohta-san sent LoPrinzi the \$3,000 -- a profit of a cool \$1,000 -- for that first model.)

These days, the little shop on Drew is finishing two guitars a week -- and five ukuleles, with the latter business creating a healthy retirement nest-egg for the boss.

LoPrinzi can hardly believe it. Barely seven years ago, he nearly closed his doors for good -- well before his ukulele ship suddenly sailed in.

But a persistent daughter changed everything.

The family business

He wears big glasses that help him see the potential in a plain plank or log. His once thick, dark hair is gray on the sides and gone on top. Two months ago, he underwent quadruple bypass surgery after a mild heart attack.

But the master luthier -- the formal name for what he does -- still moves energetically on a recent morning around the complex of cozy work-rooms inside Augustino Guitar.

They are filled with band-saws, table saws, clamps, half-finished guitar bodies and necks, and piles of the imported wood that gives his instruments their lustrous look and rich sound. He has Honduras mahogany for steel string guitars, Spanish cypress for Flamencos, East India rosewood for "dreadnaught" and classical models, ebony for fingerboards, the Hawaiian Koa for ukuleles, and more.

He points to two thin pieces -- eight inches by three feet -- of Brazilian rosewood on one of the many work tables.

"That wood alone costs about \$1,500," he says. Many of his

classical guitars go for \$4,000, and he's making a \$17,000 custom steel-string for a private aficionado.

Now, he has special help building them. Across the front room, daughter Donna Chavis, 35, is getting set to work on a table of half-finished ukuleles. The youngest of three kids born to Augustino and Carol LoPrinzi has breathed new life into the business and her dad's outlook.

The fact is, in the mid-'90s, LoPrinzi was losing interest in guitars.

"I was getting burned out," he says. "I'd been at it for almost 50 years, and I was starting to wonder, 'What was it all worth?' So there will be some guitars out there with my name on them. My heart was no longer in it, and I was seriously preparing to retire."

LoPrinzi was so down that he had given little thought to Chavis' frequent suggestions that she go to work for him. He had spent plenty of time trying to teach her older brother and sister, but they had chosen financial professions, like their banker mom, and he just didn't want to try again. But Chavis kept bugging her father. She had a knack for building things and was several months from obtaining her contractor's license. Finally, she showed her father the carpentry and tiling work she had done at her own house.

"This is bad to say, but I never realized it was her work -- I thought her husband had done it all, but it turns out he was just the gofer," LoPrinzi says. "So I said to his wife, Carol, 'Jeez, maybe I ought to hire her, and she says, 'That's what I've been trying to tell you!' "

Chavis had just gotten through a difficult pregnancy and her child had medical problems. Her father liked the idea of giving her a job where she could take time off if she needed. From the start he marveled at her way with guitars, her ability to learn techniques after the first try. Soon, she was trying her own techniques and teaching him new tricks.

"I'm pretty innovative, but Donna would try some new method, and I'd say, "My God, that's better than the way I've been doing it'," he says. "And all of a sudden, the life started to come in it for me. I saw myself in her. That's what got me going again. It made me feel so good, and made me feel like somebody wants to do what I did."

For seven years, Chavis has worked alongside her father, making guitars and now ukuleles. Her mother, recently retired from SunTrust, handles the accounting details.

Inside the instruments she makes with her dad, the authenticity cards bear two signatures now of A. and D. LoPrinzi, or just her own name on solo efforts. "When people buy a guitar, they are buying the name, the history, and everything that goes with it," he says. "Using her maiden name, Donna can carry on the tradition, and get the instant credibility of a name that's been around a long time."

Chavis is busy cutting chips of Mother of Pearl and gluing each tiny piece around the sound hole of a half-finished ukulele. Both ukuleles and guitars take about three months to complete, and there are always dozens to work on in different stages.

"It's funny, when we were all kids, when we'd get in trouble, the punishment was to have to work in dad's shop, sanding or pasting," she says. "It was hard work and the paste was messy, but I liked it. I always felt I could do this. It's in my heart."

Making, and losing, his name

LoPrinzi's parents came to America from Italy, and the young Augustino spent hours fiddling with a violin in the back of his father's barber shop in Flemington, N.J. He wasn't fiddling as in playing -- he was taking the instrument apart and re-assembling it.

"There were a couple of times I couldn't get it back together in time for my violin lesson, so the teacher said "No use!" and gave up on me," he says.

LoPrinzi went from violin to guitar as a teen, studying classical, and teaching himself how to build the instruments. He also dabbled in wood carving and glass etchings. But his father's profession won out, and LoPrinzi earned his master barber's license at 18. After two years in the Army stationed in Cold War Germany, he returned home and opened his own barber shop.

He had a room in the back where he made guitars in off hours. "After I got a couple of barbers working for me, I spent more and more time in the back room," he says. Ten years later, he said goodbye to barbering.

An early boost to his name came when a friend gave a LoPrinzi guitar to classical legend Segovia before a 1966 concert in Princeton, N.J. Segovia loved the feel and sound of it and used it in concert. After the show, he told LoPrinzi in broken English, "Don't stop make guitar."

LoPrinzi opened a New Jersey music store in 1969 and his own guitar-making factory in 1972. After three years, a large manufacturer offered to buy him out. LoPrinzi thought it would be a financial boon, so he sold the rights to his name, LoPrinzi Guitars. Almost instantly, he regretted it. There was no big windfall. "They made it so miserable for me, I got out of the company altogether," he says.

He couldn't use LoPrinzi anymore, but he went to work making new guitars under the name Augustino. All his former buyers and dealers followed him. In 1978, tired of the cold winters, he moved his family to Clearwater and opened his shop.

Business grew steadily, but LoPrinzi longed for the rights to his

surname. So in the early '80s, he contacted the company, which had stopped making guitars and changed management. "I said I just was hoping to get my name back in the family," he says.

A frustrating year later, a representative from the company showed up at his shop. "He said, "I'm here to make it official, but it's going to cost you'," LoPrinzi recalls.

The man went outside to his car, and returned moments later, holding a banjo with a broken binding. He was a casual player and wanted to make a trade. "He said, "If you can fix that, you can have your name back'," LoPrinzi says.

LoPrinzi fixed the banjo with ease. And he soon put the LoPrinzi name to use on his line of classical guitars. Today, he uses Augustino LoPrinzi on all his instruments.

As business blossomed, LoPrinzi worked with and helped other guitar builders, such as Bob Benedetto and John Buscarino, who today make guitars that sell for \$20,000 and up.

"He's a master, he's top guy," says Buscarino, a former apprentice who has a shop in North Carolina. "Augie's a real innovator. He makes great steel-string guitars, but I think his heart was always in the classical -- and that's where he really shines. If Christopher Parkening orders one of your guitars, that's really saying something."

No Don Ho

Ditto for Ohta-san and one of your ukuleles.

LoPrinzi was stunned when the ukulele king, after playing the prototype, called him in Clearwater and insisted that they meet in person. "So they flew me to Hawaii -- just so I could measure his hand," LoPrinzi says. It turns out that he had built the tuning pegs

too low. That created a nicer look, but the pegs got in the way of Ohta-san's left hand. The design flaw was corrected and production began.

Soon, Ohta-san flew LoPrinzi and his wife to Japan to see him in concert with one of the custom ukuleles.

"When I went to the concert, I still had never seen a ukulele played by a real musician," LoPrinzi says. "Well, he knew I was coming, so all the pieces he played were Italian. Here I was, the only Italian guy in the place, with all these Japanese people. He did it in my honor. When he started to play, and I saw what he was doing, I actually started laughing, because it was so far from what I expected. It was beautiful."

Ohta-san's playing -- a smooth, melodic style with a sound akin to a high-register classical guitar -- often accompanies full pop-rock and jazz ensembles. It is a far cry from the sound first introduced to Hawaii in 1879 by the Portuguese, who called the instrument a braguina. The name in Hawaiian meant "jumping fleas" for the way fingers looked while playing. It was quickly embraced as a Hawaiian cultural icon by King David Kalakaua, a ukulele lover and arts proponent.

Sophisticated ukulele playing began developing in the early 20th century. Ohta-san, now in his mid-60s, helped bring the ukulele from an accompaniment instrument into a solo art form. He appeared on the Ed Sullivan Show in 1953 and has had an array of No. 1 hits in Hawaii.

He's still huge in the Islands, but he's even bigger these days in Japan, where many spectators bring their ukuleles to the shows. "I was amazed, it's like if people went to Ruth Eckerd Hall carrying their guitars," LoPrinzi says. Ohta-san's popularity has created a surge of demand for LoPrinzi ukuleles, which are sold in Japanese stores devoted strictly to the instrument. A poll there listed him as the No. 1 builder.

"I'm almost embarrassed," he says. "I don't even know how to play the ukulele. But there I am on the front cover of this and that, and in the stores. I have an order from Andy Williams' bass player, Lyle Ritz, who's a hell of a uke player, it turns out.

"It's the funniest thing. I worked all these years trying to build a name with guitars. And just like that, I'm the great ukulele maker."

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