

# Upper Valley Uke Club

By DAVE MERRILL

Photography by TOM McNEILL

**E**ight adults, seated on colorful tiny plastic chairs, are facing each other over child-sized tables. Each strums a small, four-stringed instrument, mostly soprano or concert-size ukuleles, with at least one tenor uke joining in.

The diminutive instruments do not seem out-of-place among the tiny furniture, primary-colored cardboard bricks, building blocks and toy instruments collected in the Children's Room at the Howe Library in Hanover, N.H. Despite their childlike surroundings, the members of the Upper Valley Uke Club take their instruments, if not their playing, seriously. Some sing as they strum, some simply strum along. As they finish the song "Africa" by the band Toto, there are lots of smiles and laughter.

"That was the best we've ever done with that song!" claims one woman to many nods of agreement. "By far!"



Upper Valley Uke Club Founder Dennis Fuchs lends Brynne Spaeth a pink ukulele for her first song.

## EASIER THAN GUITAR

The Upper Valley Uke Club has been meeting biweekly since April 2010. Dennis Fuchs, the amiable club founder from Enfield, N.H., first started playing ukulele five-and-a-half years ago, after taking drum lessons for a couple months and dabbling in guitar. Upon seeing some uke videos online, he made the switch.

"I thought it would be fun and easier than guitar. It was!" Fuchs says. "If you had told me back then that I would be starting a ukulele group, I would have thought you were crazy!" Since founding the Upper Valley Uke Club, Fuchs has twice travelled to Hawaii, where he sat in with the local ukulele gathering Uke Jams 808, and has commissioned a custom made uke from the Kōolau Guitar and Ukulele Company.

The club is free and open to anyone interested in playing ukulele music, no experience necessary. Ultan Doyle of South Royalton, Vt., appreciates "how welcoming and nonjudgmental everyone is."



Jenny Beaudin strums her ukelele at a recent gathering of members.

Such spirit of camaraderie seems universal within the group. "Everyone was friendly and welcoming," says Catherine Clark, attending her first Upper Valley Uke Club meeting in December 2012. "I felt comfortable and happy, and liked the wide range of the tunes they play." Clark was inspired to pick up the uke four months ago after watching ukulele players on YouTube.

Someone calls out another song title, and after some flipping through songbooks to ensure they are all on the same page, Fuchs picks up a ukulele bass and counts out an intro. As the group begins strumming The Beatles' "Eight Days a Week" it is easy to imagine why the ukulele became George Harrison's favorite instrument. The relaxed vibe and the smiles among the players are contagious.

#### TOPPING THE CHARTS

As odd as it may seem to us today,

this humble instrument was once more popular than the guitar. During the 1920s, a Hawaiian music craze swept the United States, prompting an increase in the sales of ukes. By the late 1930s, however, the guitar had become the instrument of choice, and the ukulele fell out of favor.

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Some people came to regard the uke as little more than a toy, including many who remember Tiny Tim, the clownish, ukulele-strumming icon of the 1960s, who sang "Tiptoe Through the Tulips" in his flower-powered falsetto.

"If you mention the ukulele, someone

might bring up Tiny Tim," says club member Bob Sassaman, who has been playing the uke for about two years. "If you then play something by U2 or REM or Chuck Berry, they forget about Tiny Tim."

The uke has seen a resurgence lately, due in part to the release of ukulele albums by popular artists such as Jake Shimabukuro, Eddie Vedder and Amanda Palmer. Chart topping songs by Mumford & Sons also rely heavily on the uke. Ukulele groups have been springing up all across the country, and many new ukulele manufacturers have jumped on the bandwagon to supply the demand.

Ukuleles are fun to play and relatively inexpensive. You can purchase a fairly decent model for under \$100. Ukes are "easier on the hands than the guitar," says Nancy Wallace, a newcomer to both the club and the instrument, "and makes a cheerful sound." >>>>



Upper Valley Uke club members at the Howe Library. Back row: Pamela Goldsborough, Kerry Rosenthal, Dave Merrill, Steve Schultz, Eli Snelling and Dick Bennett. Front row: Jenny Beaudin, Doreen Schweizer, Dennis Fuchs and Cliff Pollard



Members of the Upper Valley Uke Club concentrate on their songbooks as they practice a song.

Adds Fuchs, “As with anything you want to get really good at, you should practice the hard stuff. Challenge yourself, and try new things even if they aren’t going to be rewarding right away.”



#### UKE OPEN MIC NIGHT

In addition to the biweekly meetings, Uke Club members played a Christmas concert in Hanover in 2010, and were invited to perform for a library conference at Dartmouth College this past October. In November the club hosted a well-attended ukulele open mic night at Everything But Anchovies in Hanover during which members performed individually or in groups. The evening provided Doyle with his favorite Uke Club moment, performing a duet of Ingrid Michaelson’s “You and I” with his girlfriend, Jenny.

Doyle — who enjoys playing Tin Pan Alley songs with friends for “stress relief” — likes that the Uke Club exposes him to songs he would not choose on his own. Like Fuchs, he was drawn to the instrument after trying guitar and finding it difficult, but still wanting an instrument to accompany his singing. “There’s a rewarding, social aspect to playing the uke,” he says.

Fuchs agrees that the ukulele lends itself to social situations more so than many other instruments. “Guitar players take lessons and don’t perform until they are proficient,” he says. “Ukers, even if they’re not very good at first, get excited to find other people who are excited about this instrument. The pressure is off; it’s a zero pressure instrument. Plus, unlike guitar, you can get as many ukes as you can fit in a room and it won’t be too loud.” UVL

#### Learn More

Should you desire to give the ukulele a try, the friendly folks at the Upper Valley Uke Club will be waiting to welcome you into their enthusiastic circle. For meeting dates and more information about the club, visit their website at [www.uvukeclub.com](http://www.uvukeclub.com)