

The Ukulele - A brief history

Origins

In the year 1879, the first Portuguese arrived in Hawaii. Included among the many things they brought from their native land was a small stringed instrument called the Portuguese Braga, sometimes also referred to as the Braquiña.

In that year, a ship named the “Ravenscrag” arrived in Hawaii from Portugal. The ship carried about 400 men, women and children from Madeira. In the group of first arrivals were three musical instrument makers, Augusto Diaz, Manuel Nunes, and José do Espirito Santo. Each one has been credited, at one time or another, with having adapted the braquiña into the ukulele, which has become as much a part of Hawaii as pineapple.

Among the many passengers aboard the “Ravenscrag” was a musician named Joaõ Fernandez. A popular belief is that when the ship arrived in Honolulu harbour, Fernandez jumped onto the wharf and began singing and strumming lively Portuguese folk songs. The Hawaiian people were noticeably moved by the performance and were immediately taken by the small stringed instrument he was playing.

How did the “ukulele” get its name? According to a pamphlet at the Bishop Museum:

“The instrument was heard one day by Edward Purvis, a British army officer who was Vice-Chamberlain of King Kalakaua’s court. He was delighted with the size and the sound and asked to be taught, and soon he was playing for various court functions. Because of Mr. Purvis’ small build and his lively antics while performing on the instrument, he was compared to a jumping flea. The Hawaiian, fond of nicknames, called him “ukulele”. (Uku meaning flea, and Lele meaning jumping) The instrument was an instant success and even King Kalakaua learned to play it”

Manufacturing

In 1880, Manuel Nunes was the first to open a ukulele shop in Hawaii. Many others soon followed, including both Diaz and Santo who worked for a short period of time for Nunes. By the early 1900’s the ukulele was showing up in several west coast cities in the United States. It wasn’t until 1915 that the ukulele really became popular in North America. In 1916, Samuel Kamaka began manufacturing ukuleles in Hawaii in a large scale. Made from Koa wood unique to Hawaii, the Kamaka Ukulele remains to this day, one of the most renowned ukuleles in the world. Prices can range from \$400 to over \$2000 for a handmade Koa ukulele. From the 1920’s to the 1950’s the ukulele experienced tremendous growth in popularity. In North America, the C.F.Martin guitar company began manufacturing ukuleles. Using Mahogany as their choice wood, they soon established themselves as one of the premiere ukulele makers in the world. Today there are numerous ukulele manufacturers both in Hawaii and in other parts of the world. In addition, there are many other custom builders who build exquisite ukuleles in many styles and shapes.

Playing

The Hawaiians were quick to accept the ukulele and it became an important part of the basic foundation at the Hawaiian string sound we know today. It was used primarily as a rhythm instrument. However, it did not remain a Hawaiian instrument in the sense that it was totally ethnic and adopted by many other cultures. Because it had only four strings, it was easy to play. And because one could easily strum it and sing with it, people from all parts of the world quickly accepted it, especially during the Roaring 20’s period in the United States. That was the beginning of world acceptance and the recognition that the ukulele was a legitimate musical instrument, bordering on the novelty category, but none the less a Hawaiian instrument that could be used for any kind of music.

As an instrument to accompany singing, it is perhaps the simplest of all instruments. In a matter of some 30 minutes, one can learn 3 or 4 basic chords and strum an acceptable accompaniment for singing many, many songs. However, as a solo instrument, it required, as any musical instrument does, formal study and lots of practice.

In recent years, names such as Roy Smeck, Jim Beloff, Lyle Ritz, Troy Fernandez, Herb Ohta, Chalmers Doane, and the late Israel Kamakawiwo’ole, have emerged as virtuosos on the ukulele. Other notable ukulele names include the Beatles, Elvis Presley, Pat Boone, George Formby. Modern day ukulele virtuosos include Jake Shimabukuro, Herb Ohta Jr., and James Hill. These and many others helped popularize the ukulele as we know it today.

It was this simplicity that first attracted the Hawaiians to the instrument and it is this simplicity that still draws many young musicians to the instrument.
