

Tahoe ukulelians string together fun and harmony

By Susan Wood

Julliard, it's not. But the American Legion Hall on Wednesday nights has become the main stage for South Shore ukulelians seeking fun, friendship and a unified front for an activity that has struck a chord with many aspiring musicians.

It's almost as if the 60-plus people gathered in Tahoe may strum their cares away in perfect harmony.

It's a good sign when a guest walks upstairs at the hall and recognizes the song being played by so many people thrown together like a giant band.

"Blueberry Hill" made the song list one recent Wednesday night, and the room full of tenor, soprano, concert and baritone strummers didn't disappoint.



Steve and Linda Kurek at a jam session at the American Legion.
Photo/Susan Wood

The songbook assembled by Bob and Diane Fannan, who co-founded the club with Jeff and Karen Miner four years ago, lists 306 songs.

“I’ve been playing for four years, and I can play everything in this book,” Diane Fannan said, pointing to the fat book sitting on the table during the break while volunteers called out raffle winners. “Does anybody practice?” she asked.

A resounding “no” could be heard from some of the players walking by.

“It’s a simple instrument. Every person who wouldn’t believe in a million years they’d be playing an instrument can learn it,” she said over the sound of the concert going on in the next room. Most players sit at long tables, with a handful of leaders taking the stage. In another room, 14 ukuleles line one table, with chips and snacks filling another.

“We have all levels of play here. And I’ve noticed my rhythm has gotten better (since playing ukulele),” Fannan told *Lake Tahoe News*.



Bob and Diane Fannan started the ukulele group in 2013.
Photo/Susan Wood

The Fannans attend ukulele meetups and events when they’re on vacation – whether in France, England or across the United States. They’ve even gone on a ukulele cruise.

It’s the social setting that most told *Lake Tahoe News* is the reason for the regular attendance – especially people who’d like to do more outreach in their community.

“We have found people going through a divorce or another tragedy making this the highlight of their week,” Fannan said, further noting about two-thirds of the group consist of

retired people.

Between each song, some of the South Shore ukulelians clap, others sigh, many rock and sway. But most of the players have smiles on their faces. It's hard not to with an instrument that made Hawaiian musician Israel "Iz" Kamakawiwo'ole famous with his sentimental blend of "Somewhere Over the Rainbow"/ "What a Wonderful World" released in 1993. It's popular at weddings and other special occasions.



Ukulele playing is a ritual on Wednesdays in South Lake Tahoe. Photo/Susan Wood

Special is the ukulele – with four strings (G-C-E-A) caressed by four fingers playing three chords – C, F and G. The nuances in sound between the four types of ukuleles range in tone and with those who are drawn to them. The soprano is popular with children and those with smaller hands, while the concert version provides a classic tone. Tenor players seek a fuller

sound, while the deeper, richer baritones draw guitar players.

Typically, ukuleles resemble a small acoustic guitar and are generally made of wood, though variants have been composed of plastic. The most expensive ones are made of mahogany, but are traditionally constructed with acacia koa wood.

Steve Byrne of South Lake Tahoe, who showed up on his bicycle, plays guitar as well the ukulele. At times, he cradled his ukulele like a guitar, appearing quite serious while playing every song. He likes the unity and social setting of the ukulele group, which started at Mo's with nine people in the first few years before moving to Dart Liquor's loft, then Lake Tahoe Golf Course. The club mushroomed in attendance.

The club plays from 6-8pm, with some eager socialites strolling in at 5pm for drinks, chats or instruction during the happy hour – which turns out to be the whole time.



Not all ukuleles are the same.
Photo/Susan Wood

“What’s nice is to have a little instruction when you’ve

reached a threshold. There's no intimidation. Everybody here wants to have a good time," Byrne said.

Wannabes and beginners may receive lessons before the start time from the experienced players in the group, and the Fannans provide extra ukuleles for anyone who happens to show up. The club has seen 100 players appear in one night.

"This is a life changer for a lot of people," Bob Fannan said.

He further admitted to no marriages resulting yet from the club's outings, but some couples have met there. Other spouses use the evening to do something fun together that's a bit different from their regular routine.

Take Linda and Steve Kurek. She taught music for 38 years and said she enjoys the relaxing setting. The couple shared a songbook propped up near the wine glasses. He plays on occasion for the residents at the Barton Skilled Nursing Facility.

Julie Threewit teaches ukulele at Sierra House Elementary School and admits to having "the bug" of buying different ukuleles, a condition Bob Fannan refers to as "UAS" meaning ukulele acquisition syndrome.

Between 2010 and 2012, ukulele sales nationwide jumped from 581,000 to more than 1 million, according to the National Association of Music Merchants. Sales have climbed to \$89.8 million in 2015.

Ukulele enthusiasm has taken off in popularity in clubs all over. And this one's no different.

Aaron Lujano, who has worked for the Guitar Center in Reno for five years, told *Lake Tahoe News* over the phone that he's noticed a surge in ukulele sales at his store.

"I sell about five or six a day," Lujano said. "There are even high school classes here."

Even visiting relatives have gotten in on the act as a planned activity.

Mandy Kendall, who claims ukulele playing builds confidence, brought along her brother-in-law Paul Melia from England to the South Shore outing.

The duo raised the level of concentration and probably the callouses of their hands when the leaders threw in a contemporary number – Bruno Mars’ “Count On Me.”



Paul Melia and Mandy Kendall are regulars at ukulele night. Photo/Susan Wood

The ukulele made its debut on the Arthur Godfrey Show of the 1960s, and Tiny Tim featured it with his 1968 hit “Tiptoe Through the Tulips.”

The instrument declined in popularity in the 1980s until a new

generation of musicians took it up in the next decade.

Marge Bornino, who at age 90, started playing the ukulele at 14 in her days hanging out at Venice Beach in Southern California.

“We went surfing and played ukulele. That’s what we did,” said Bornino, who plays despite suffering from a carpal tunnel injury.

To this day, Bornino also still strums the bass. Playing a ukulele takes her back to her younger days more than any other activity – back to the days of Bob Marley and the Beatles.

Rather fitting, Bornino was right at home with the last song of the night “Lady Madonna.”