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Ukulele

FALL 2019

THE UKULELE ARRIVES!

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NUNES, AND
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SONGS

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MY BLUE HULA GIRL
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AARON KEIM

POPOKI MAKE A CAT
AURA LEE FOR TRIO
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OHANA
3 UNIQUE
VOICES

BEGINNER'S GUIDE

YOUR 1ST UKULELE LESSON

CAN-DO ATTITUDE

PETER LUONGO IS TAKING UKULELE TO THE MAX

BY JIM D'VILLE

You never know what will happen when you give a five-year-old an accordion. For Vancouver, British Columbia–native Peter Luongo, it set him on a musical journey that would eventually take him around the world preaching the gospel of ukulele education. And during that now more than five-decade journey, Peter has changed the lives of thousands of young students. Now he has his sights set on accomplishing the same thing for adult players.

“My dad had always had a love of music since he was a boy. But coming from poverty, there was no opportunity for him to take music lessons. So, when I was old enough, he

very much advocated for me to start music lessons.” The Luongo family’s Italian heritage had something to do with young Peter’s start on accordion. “The instrument my father just loved was the accordion. In Italy, they had people that could play and sing folk songs, and I think that was something he envisioned would be true in his family as well.” And it was no small sacrifice that Peter’s father made. In 1964, he bought his son an accordion costing \$500. By today’s standards that doesn’t seem like much. But that \$500 in today’s economy equates to nearly \$4,000. “That was the start of him setting a path for me to be involved in music.”





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SOMETHING ELSE

A few years later, Peter's brother started taking drum lessons, and by age 13 he and his brother were gigging. "My dad had spent a fair amount of time singing Italian folk songs to me, and me playing them back to him by ear. So, it didn't take very long before my brother and I were fully engaged as the house band at Orlando's Restaurant on Commercial Drive in Vancouver's Italian neighborhood." And this was no one-off gig. Peter and his brother played at Orlando's every weekend for the next six years! And they didn't stop there. For the five following years, they played every Friday and Saturday night at an English pub out by the airport. "In terms of developing my musical chops, it was playing every weekend from age 13 to 25—singing, playing, and entertaining. But certainly, you can only play so many polkas until you're longing for something else!"

That "something else" turned out to be the ukulele. Peter enrolled in a ukulele course in university taught by Dr. Cam Trowsdale. The course was based on the method introduced to the Canadian school system by influential instructor J. Chalmers Doane. As you can imagine, transitioning

from the accordion to the ukulele is not as easy as falling off a frozen log. "It was not a natural transition. It was something I very much had to work at. But what was apparent right from the get-go was how effective the instrument would be at teaching children to become musically literate."

After finishing his university studies, Peter took a school administration job in 1979 with the Langley School District, located just south of Vancouver. Despite the fact Peter went through university as a music education student, his main desire was to teach a regular classroom. "I wanted to be a music teacher, but first and foremost I wanted to be an educator." His duties at Langley did, however, require him to teach music to the children in grades four, five, and six. He chose to use the ukulele. "Look, I wasn't going to have a classroom full of accordion players. Also, I wasn't going to teach band."

ENSEMBLE TIMES

In 1981, Peter began rehearsing a small group of students in an ensemble setting. In just a few short years, that group would blossom into the now world-renowned

Langley Ukulele Ensemble. Peter himself admits that in 1981 he wasn't that great a ukulele player but, "Since I had been gigging since I was 13, I had a good sense of arranging. I think the best way to sum it up is that I was musical." It didn't take long before the LUE became polished enough to perform in Hawaii for the first time, in 1985. The next year found the ensemble performing 35 times at the Canada Pavilion at the World's Fair in Vancouver. "As a result of the notoriety, we started to attract a better echelon of performer, player, and musician. A young James Hill was one of the people who was attracted to the quality of the ensemble." In 1993 the LUE began regularly performing each summer at the Sheraton Waikiki in Honolulu and logging up to 80 other performances per year. "When you're performing that much and having the opportunity to develop your skill on the instrument, you can't help but become something that an audience look at, listen to, and go 'wow!'"

After Hill left the ensemble, the group continued to flourish. In 2007 the Langley Ukulele Ensemble embarked on a major concert tour which included performances at the Royal International Halifax Tattoo for 9,000 people a night; a two-week residency at the Sheraton Waikiki; the Stratford Summer Music Festival in Ontario (the same place where Justin Bieber got his start); and finally at the Ukulele Ceilidh in Liverpool, Nova Scotia, in October. "So, you imagine how good these kids were by the time we hit the Ceilidh, after spending the summer performing major concerts for tens of thousands of people." While downstairs rehearsing for their Ceilidh performance, Tony Coleman—the producer and director of *The Mighty Uke* documentary—and his cameraman entered the rehearsal area. "As Tony came into the room, he told his cameraman to turn on his camera. Tony later told me, 'as I watched the ensemble rehearsing, I knew I had my movie.'"