

“LIFE IS A UKULELE!”



Some of the members of Worcester Uke Club playing at an outdoor session last July 2021

About 12 years ago I was on holiday in France with my wife and sister-in-law. We went to a `Brocante` sale one Sunday morning and while walking past all the many items and stalls offering rusty tools, sticky sweetmeats, vegetables and souvenirs of dubious origin my sister-in-law espied a little ukulele lying amongst a heap of other bric-a-brac.

Knowing my interest in music (I play the drums and blow harmonicas) she quickly accosted me and persuaded me to buy the little instrument for the princely sum of ten Euros (at the time about £7!).

That was the start of opening up a whole new world to me – the world of the Ukulele!

To cut a long story short, when I returned home I joined Worcester Ukulele club and learned how to play a few chords on my new acquisition. But the playing is a just small part of what you buy into when you acquire a Ukulele. There is a whole world wide community of Ukulele clubs, Festivals and events of all descriptions that take place all year round. My own experience centred around the Monday club meetings to start with when anywhere between 50 and 80 of us crowded into the back room of a pub in Worcester to play and sing a variety of songs both old and new. The club nights are social events where we not only play our instruments but also make friends and support each other through life`s turbulences(!). As I said, when you buy a ukulele, you don`t just buy a little musical instrument!

Worcester Ukulele Club was set up about 15 years ago by a small group of local players who wanted to meet up and play their instruments together. Since then the club has grown and

now has about 120 members on its books. We meet every Monday evening at the University having graduated from our pub backroom. We have a variety of different formats including open mic evenings, beginners events and evenings that focus on particular types of music. I have lead several of these dedicated to Blues, Rock `n` Roll and Folk music.

We also raise a lot of money for charity by playing gigs in the community. If you have wandered around Worcester city centre in recent times it is more than likely you may have seen some of us playing in the High street or in Crowngate for Children in Need. Our most recent fundraiser was to help Ukraine We raised £2500 in 5 hours playing in the city centre. We also play many of our gigs in local care homes and residential establishments. Over the last few years we have raised many thousands of pounds for good causes such as Alzheimer`s Research, Heart Disease and Stroke, Parkinson`s and the Air Ambulance.

The humble Ukulele has taken over as the folk instrument of our times. From its origins in Portugal in the middle ages it rapidly gained popularity in Hawaii of all places. The Hawaiian connection came about when Portuguese sailors brought it with them and captured the imagination of the locals during the late 19th century. From there it gained wider acceptance and it features in many old songs and movies throughout the 20th Century. In schools, the Uke has replaced the recorder as the instrument of choice for children to learn about music. Before the pandemic hit I started a Uke club at the school where my wife was deputy head. Together with 3 or 4 other `Volunteers` from Worcester Uke Club we taught a group of about 20 children every week and held a concert at the end of the year. They used to love it!

Performers such as George Formby popularised the Uke and planted its image in peoples minds as a comedy instrument that is not taken too seriously. However, most of the time GF didn`t play the Uke, he played another instrument called a `Banjolele` which is a bit like a drum on a stick! Banjoleles are not generally well received in Ukulele clubs because they are a very loud and brash instrument, not at all like the friendly little Uke!

Ukuleles come in a variety of sizes and shapes which have developed over the years. The smallest is a `Piccolo` Uke and then it goes up through Soprano, Concert, Tenor and Baritone sizes. I play a tenor uke most of the time. Ukes can cost anything from around £20 for a children`s starter up to thousands of pounds for top of the range professional instruments. There are also a number of dedicated Ukulele stores around the country where you can try out a range of different types to find what suits you best.

The nearest one to us is `The Uke Room` in the Forest of Dean – <https://theukeroom.com/>

What would I do without my Uke today? Well, one thing is for sure, I wouldn`t have the friends and social networks that I have built up since I started playing and I am sure that life would have had far more opportunity to make me feel depressed were it not for the joy and comfort of playing such a fabulous little instrument that is so easy to learn from the outset and yet provides such a range of opportunities to make life exciting, vibrant and worthwhile!!

If you want my opinion it is the ultimate cure for most of the ailments of society!

If anyone who reads this is interested in learning more about the Ukulele and getting involved please come along to the local club sometime. You can contact us through our website: <https://www.worcester-uke-club.co.uk/>

You may even want to put your toe in the water and join our next `Beginners Workshop` on Sunday 29th May at the University. Details are on the Club website.

To find out more about the world wide community of the Ukulele, here Are some links to start you off....

https://www.gotaukulele.com/p/ukulele-festival-calendar_11.html

<https://www.ukuleleorchestra.com/>

<https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Ukulele>

Enjoy life, get a Uke!!

Rob