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Ukulele group strings together good times

'You come, you play, you sing, you get happy'

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December 26, 2011

Picture a cozy Oak Park coffee house full of people sitting at small, round tables.

Some are wearing fuzzy green antlers.

All are playing ukuleles.

And all are merrily singing along to everything from Christmas carols to such mainstays of the ukulele canon as "Secret Agent Man" and "Love Potion No. 9."

Now add kazoos.

As scenes of holiday cheer go, this one was, frankly, stupendous.

Kelly Howe and her partner, Martin Zimmerman, who live around the corner from the Eastgate Cafe, could not believe their luck.

"Not only did we happen on the ukulele club, we happened on the ukulele club's holiday party," said Howe.

"Life is good. This is wonderful. It couldn't be any better," said her father, Fred Howe, who was visiting from Rochester, N.Y.

Every Thursday night, the Wonderwall's Oak Park Ukulele Meetup Group gathers — three times a month at the Eastgate Cafe and once at Wonderwall Music Shoppe & Emporium nearby — for two hours of playing and singing. Thursday was also the holiday party, which is why Pete Pollack was keeping time with bells wrapped around one ankle.

The room filled with the plinking of 14 ukuleles as the players strummed and sang through "Rudolph the Red-Nosed Reindeer" and "Jingle Bells."

"Dave, pick the next one," Terry Fitzgerald, who was leading the session, called to David Causton.

"Ooh, I get to pick one?" Causton said.

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"Don't let the power go to your antlers," Fitzgerald said.

It wasn't just the holidays that provoked the cheerful mood. Or the refreshments, though when Fitzgerald remarked to the waitress, "I find myself in a strange, wineless condition," that condition was swiftly treated.

It was the ukulele.

The instrument boasts impressive hipster credentials these days. But to the meetup players, its appeal is simple and sweet.

"It's fun, it's easy and it's portable," said Len Raminski.

It's simple to learn, said Lisa Golladay, who went on to prove it by showing me three chords on a ukulele another player let me borrow. Within minutes I was playing along to "The Lion Sleeps Tonight," which, conveniently, only has three chords.

Most important, "ukulele music is happy," said Kathy Wheeler.

"You can't play the ukulele without smiling," Raminski said.

Certainly not alongside other people. Honolulu-born GiGi Wong-Monaco, who founded the ukulele meetup in 2008, couldn't make it to the holiday party. But by phone she said the weekly gatherings work a kind of magic.

"Playing together in a friendly environment, we become like a family," said Wong-Monaco, who with her husband owns Wonderwall Music Shoppe & Emporium. "Even if you came once or twice, you want to come back."

"You come, you play, you sing, you get happy," said Joe Pesce, who was at Thursday's session, wearing and frequently shaking a Santa hat with a bell. "I always tell my wife, I don't want to miss my therapy."

Who would want to miss the ukulele version of "Silver Bells" with separate parts for men and women, leading to a friendly argument over who had done better?

"A battle of the sexes over 'Silver Bells,'" sighed Wheeler.

Or Fitzgerald's excellent horse whinny, which he deployed at the start of "Sleigh Ride."

Chris McIntosh, a longtime ukulele player and teacher who was leading that song, was pleased with the whinny, though "I don't hear any clip-clopping," she gently upbraided the ensemble.

They ran through several Beatles songs. The ukulele has solid Beatles credentials. All four Beatles played the instrument, Causton said, and Paul McCartney regularly plays a tribute song to the late George Harrison on the ukulele in concert. And the chord structure of Beatles songs, he said, lends itself to the tuning of the ukulele.

At 9 p.m. the session ended, but a number of people stayed, standing in a circle and playing on, the repertoire growing ever more intriguing.

By the time they got to "Werewolves of London," Kelly Howe's mouth had fallen open in disbelief.

"We were going to leave, but then we heard this," she said. "We had to stay."

The meetup is open to anyone who wants to give the ukulele a try.

"You don't have to be good to join us," Fitzgerald said. "You can buy your ukulele and come to us that night."

The weekly gatherings are as festive as the holiday party, regulars say, only without the antlers. But the holiday season offers an appropriate incentive to give the uke a try.

"I think everyone in the whole world needs to learn the ukulele," Chris McIntosh said. "There would be peace on earth."

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