

## MUSIC



# Four-String Phenom

Though ukulele sensation **JAKE SHIMABUKURO** just wants to make people smile with his music, his singular talent has music fans taking him — and his instrument — very seriously.

**G** O AHEAD AND LAUGH AT HIS little four-stringed ukulele. Jake Shimabukuro does not care. Feel free to call it a child's toy. Even though his is an expensive custom-made model, he'd agree. After all, he started playing when he was a child. His mother gave him his first instrument — a toy — when he was 4. Hooked from the first notes, he couldn't put the thing down. His parents had to pry it from his hands just to get him to come to the dinner table or do his homework.

If it had been any other stringed instrument — a violin, a cello, maybe even a zither — they might have called him a prodigy. But they didn't, because just about anyone, even a 4-year-old, can quickly learn to make a ukulele produce a simple, jangly, harmonic chord that nicely backs up a singer's melody.

Not just anyone, however,

can take that same ukulele, with its four strings and its limited range of just two octaves, and produce a spot-on instrumental rendition of the classic rock-classical opera collision that is Queen's "Bohemian Rhapsody." And the fact that Jake Shimabukuro, now 35, can do that, has earned him monikers like "the ukulele's Jimi Hendrix" and "the ukulele's equivalent of Segovia, Django, Stanley Jordan, Leo Kottke and John Mayer ... all rolled into one."

You would be forgiven for thinking that sounds ridiculous. Even if you did, Shimabukuro still wouldn't care.

"I'm not offended by people who don't take the ukulele seriously," he says from the Honolulu airport, where, just after daybreak, the Hawaii native will depart for a series of performances that will take him from California to North Carolina. "I love it, actually. One of the best things about being a touring ukulele player is that people have such low expectations."

Well, not everyone has low expectations. Certainly not the tens of thousands who snapped up **Shimabukuro's 2011 album, *Peace Love Ukulele***, which debuted at No. 1 on the Billboard World Albums Chart. And not the 10 million people who have watched Shimabukuro's mesmerizing rendition of George Harrison's "While My Guitar Gently Weeps" on YouTube. That performance, recorded in 2006 for a New York TV show called *Ukulele Disco* and uploaded soon after, launched Shimabukuro's career out of Honolulu coffee shops and onto stages and recording studios all over the world. He has toured with Jimmy Buffet, played alongside Cyndi Lauper, and recorded with both Bela Fleck, the acclaimed banjo virtuoso, and Yo-Yo Ma, arguably the world's greatest cellist. "I really owe everything to the Internet," Shimabukuro says. "I wouldn't be where I am today if not for YouTube."

Where he is today is at the lead of a growing ukulele movement that owes everything to the Internet as well. Thousands of ukulele hobbyists have uploaded their best efforts to YouTube, and ukulele blogs



# Great STEAK HOUSES OF North America™

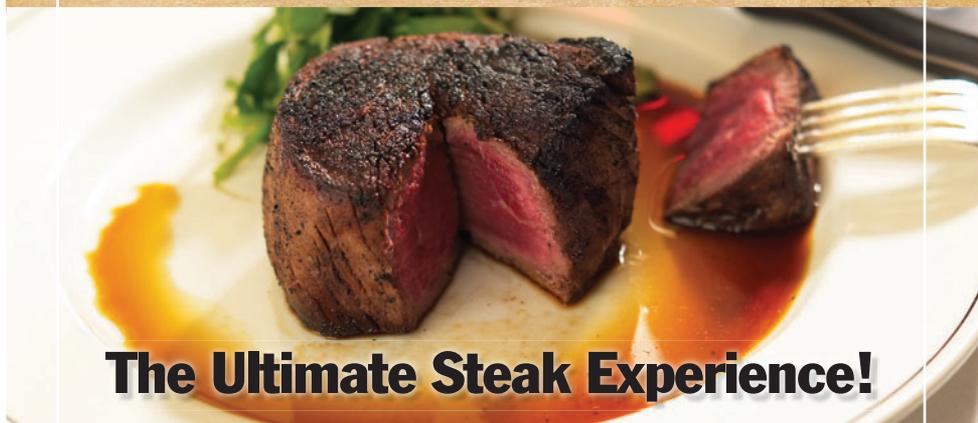
now abound, as do ukulele apps that help novices learn their instruments and keep them in tune. Popular musicians are in on the trend too. Everyone from pop-country princess Taylor Swift to indie darlings Beirut to grunge guru Eddie Vedder have recorded songs prominently featuring ukuleles. Vedder even made the instrument the centerpiece of his last album, titled, simply, *Ukulele Songs*. As a result, ukulele sales are soaring. The National Association of Music Merchants says ukuleles now account for more than 3 percent of all so-called “fretted instrument” sales, with 600,000 ukuleles being purchased annually at a total cost of about \$42 million, up from \$33 million in 2009. Shimabukuro can be credited for a lot of those sales.

“Jake, and YouTube in general, have been great at generating excitement for the ukulele,” says Russ Hayes, founder and proprietor of Sound Uke, a retail ukulele shop in Lakewood, Wash. “But Jake is key because he is showing the capability of such a humble and basic instrument. I think that gives folks hope that they, too, can do great things with the ukulele.”

Great things, maybe. But “Bohemian Rhapsody” or Leonard Cohen’s “Hallelujah” or classical piano compositions? No. Only Shimabukuro does that. Though he may be best known for covering everyone from Michael Jackson to Adele, Shimabukuro composes much of his own music and doesn’t limit himself to any one style. “Growing up I was a big fan of Bruce Lee,” he says, “and he embraced all styles of martial arts. So I remember saying to myself, ‘If Bruce Lee played the ukulele, how would he approach the instrument?’ That’s why I embrace all styles of music.”

There’s another reason Shimabukuro doesn’t limit himself, and it has to do with something the ukulele virtuoso can’t do: sing.

“I’m a terrible singer,” he says. “Traditionally when you’d play the ukulele, you would strum the chord and you would sing a song. But when I started, because I couldn’t sing, no one could recognize the song I was



## The Ultimate Steak Experience!

### Manny’s

[mannyssteakhouse.com](http://mannyssteakhouse.com)

MINNEAPOLIS, MN  
612.339.9900

PROPRIETORS: Phil Roberts, Peter Mihajlov  
& Kevin Kuester

### Grill 225

[grill225.com](http://grill225.com)

CHARLESTON, SC  
843.266.4222

PROPRIETOR: Nick Palassis  
EXECUTIVE CHEF: Demetre Castanas

### Benjamin Steak House

[benjaminsteakhouse.com](http://benjaminsteakhouse.com)

NEW YORK, NY  
212.297.9177

PROPRIETOR: Benjamin Prelvukaj  
CHEF: Arturo McLeod

### McKendrick’s Steak House

[mckendricks.com](http://mckendricks.com)

ATLANTA, GA  
770.512.8888

PROPRIETORS: Claudia & Doug McKendrick  
GM/CHEF: Emile Blau & Tom Minchella

### Malone’s

[malonesrestaurant.com](http://malonesrestaurant.com)

LEXINGTON, KY  
859.335.6500

PROPRIETORS: Brian McCarty & Bruce Drake

### Metropolitan Grill

[themetropolitangrill.com](http://themetropolitangrill.com)

SEATTLE, WA  
206.624.3287

PROPRIETOR: Ron Cohn

### RingSide Steakhouse

[RingSideSteakhouse.com](http://RingSideSteakhouse.com)

PORTLAND, OR  
503.223.1513

PROPRIETORS: Jan, Scott & Craig Peterson

### Gene & Georgetti

[geneandgeorgetti.com](http://geneandgeorgetti.com)

CHICAGO, IL  
312.527.3718

PROPRIETORS: Tony & Marion Durpetti

### St. Elmo Steak House

[stelmos.com](http://stelmos.com)

INDIANAPOLIS, IN  
317.635.0636

PROPRIETORS: Steve Huse & Craig Huse

### Pittsburgh Blue

[pittsburghbluesteak.com](http://pittsburghbluesteak.com)

EDINA, MN  
952.567.2700

PROPRIETOR: Randy Stanley

### III Forks

[iiforks.com](http://iiforks.com)

DALLAS, TX  
972.267.1776

PROPRIETOR: Chris Vogeli

HALLANDALE BEACH, FL  
954.457.3920

PROPRIETOR: Dennis Labrador

INDEPENDENTLY OWNED & OPERATED

[www.GreatSteakofNA.com](http://www.GreatSteakofNA.com)

playing. So at a young age I decided I had to find a way to strum the chord and play the melody — the part you'd normally sing — at the same time."

Shimabukuro plays the instrument with a strumming technique that can be both fast and loud — which a rock guitarist might call "shredding" — and slow and

quiet. Sometimes simultaneously. On "Let's Dance," a flamenco tune he composed, he uses both techniques, slapping the strings at the base of the instrument with one hand and gently plucking the strings along the neck of the ukulele with the other. Close your eyes, and the resulting sound is as if two guitars were playing. Open your eyes,

and you see the other thing that's made Shimabukuro a draw: He's intense. Theatrical. Typically dressed like a rocker, in jeans and a graphic T-shirt, Shimabukuro does everything one of those guys might do except for smashing apart his instrument at the end of the performance.

"In Hawaii there have always been people who could play the ukulele really well and in a similar style to Jake," says Ryan Esaki, who runs a website out of Hawaii called Ukulele Underground. "But the difference with Jake is that when he performs, he exudes so much passion for the instrument you can feel his energy just being in the audience."

That passion is palpable not just when Shimabukuro plays but also when he talks about the ukulele. He's something of an evangelist for the instrument, claiming that the world would be a better place if everyone played the ukulele. "I know that sounds funny," he says in a laid-back, Hawaii-meets-hippie accent. "But it's so true. The ukulele is the instrument of peace. You can't possibly be angry when you're strumming a ukulele. You have to smile when you play it and when you hear it. It brings happiness to people."

Laughs, too. The ukulele is not just the instrument of peace; it's also one of comedy. In the 1960s, Tiny Tim famously parlayed a falsetto singing voice and a twangy ukulele into a career. Today, comedy and the ukulele still go together: In California, a band called the Ooks of Hazzard has become famous for its goofball performances, and halfway around the world from there, a group called the Ukulele Orchestra of Great Britain is noted for its intentionally absurd shows that feature musicians in formal wear playing such compositions as the theme from *Shaft* all on ukuleles. Now, how are you supposed to take the instrument seriously after witnessing something like that?

Shimabukuro, who has an album due out in October and a PBS documentary about his life that will air in 2013, still doesn't care. "I love that the ukulele is not intimidating," he says. "If most people think of it as a toy, I embrace that because I think that people should not be afraid of music and of trying to play music for themselves. I could sit with a person for three minutes and I could teach them a whole song on a ukulele. It is that easy to play." 

Frequent *American Way* contributor **JOSEPH GUINTO** is now in the market for a ukulele. And world peace.



**BEFORE**  
AGE 51  
21% Body Fat

**WE'LL help you GET YOUR DRIVE BACK**

**AFTER**  
AGE 56  
8% Body Fat

**Jacob Rosenstein, M.D.**  
*Neurosurgeon*

**Improve Energy • Increase Drive  
Think Sharper • Look Younger**

**HEALTH, VITALITY AND HIGH PERFORMANCE  
CAN BE YOURS. CALL TODAY!**

Scan this code with your phone & watch testimonial videos.



**817-701-0307**  
[www.800AgeExpert.com](http://www.800AgeExpert.com)

**SOUTHWEST**  
**AGE INTERVENTION INSTITUTE**



Our program is not covered by insurance or Medicare.  
We do accept credit cards and offer convenient financing options.