



Southern Ukulele Store
Bournemouth Ukulele
Society (SUSBUS)



Paul Tucker

Ukulele Heaven

Southbourne has become a place of pilgrimage for lovers of a little Hawaiian guitar, as Jeremy Miles discovers

Paul Tucker is holding forth on his favourite subject, waxing lyrical about the delights of the Mele, the KoAlohar and the Kanilea. It might sound like double Dutch to a casual passer-by but, if you know your ukuleles, this is pure Hawaiian heaven. For these are just some of the top-end instruments stocked at Paul's Southern Ukulele Store in Bournemouth.

At around £800-a-time these are serious instruments, beautifully hand-crafted from specially selected hardwoods. But while they may be beyond the pocket of many, they are probably not even close to the ultimate acquisition for the ukulele obsessive.

Just a brief discussion with Paul, who knows more than most about the 'ukelear fallout' that is currently sweeping the world of music, reveals that when it comes to custom-built 'specials', the sky's the limit.

Conversely there are plenty of good, cheap ukuleles on the market and that, not surprisingly, is a major factor in their appeal. Sales of these four-string mini-guitars are soaring and Paul's Tardis-like store in Southbourne - the biggest ukulele outlet in Europe - is doing business with old hands and new converts on a daily basis.

A long-time Bournemouth musician, sound engineer and music shop worker,



Ukuleles at the Southern Ukulele Store

Paul fell in love with the instrument back in the 1990s when asked to do sound for the Ukulele Orchestra of Great Britain at the annual Larmer Tree Festival. It was, he admits, a challenge. "Suddenly seven men and two women appeared, ukuleles in hand, and said 'We've got loads of these and they don't plug in.' and I realised I'd better find a few microphones." The performance was an eye-opener. "I was absolutely knocked out," says Paul. "I went into work the next day and told my boss about it. A couple of weeks later he bought me a ukulele for my birthday and that was it!"

A decade on Paul is considered an international expert. He plays in his own band, The Mother Ukers, and runs the Southern Ukulele Store which operates from the Music Is Life shop in Seabourne Road. He remains big chums with the Ukulele Orchestra of Great Britain (UOGB), who will be playing a major concert at the Lighthouse Centre for the Arts in Poole on October 8. Indeed UOGB member Richie Williams is a Dorset resident and a regular customer.

Paul will be giving workshops before their show, selling instruments and

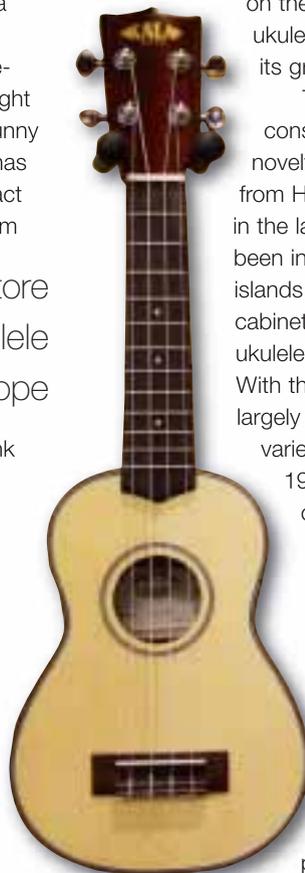
dispensing advice. Like many other ukulele players, the orchestra which was first launched 26 years ago, started on a shoestring using instruments bought with loose change. Quirky, funny and talented, their success has been phenomenal. With an act that combines everything from

Paul's Tardis-like store is the biggest ukulele outlet in Europe

music hall oldies to post-punk posturing, they appeal to a wide-ranging audience and have appeared all over the world. Their music has been used in movies and plays and they are firm favourites on YouTube. Collaborators have included Madness, the Kaiser Chiefs, and Ministry of Sound. Not bad for a band whose first gig in 1985 was supposed to be a one-off. But while the UOGB

have been an undoubted influence on the soaring popularity of the ukulele they are a symptom of its growing ubiquity as well.

The instrument - originally considered something of a novelty - was first imported from Hawaii, to the States back in the late 19th-century. It had been introduced to the Pacific islands by immigrant Portuguese cabinet makers. The name ukulele means 'jumping flea'. With this strange antecedence largely unknown, it hit the British variety circuit big-time in the 1930s and 40s when comedian George Formby had huge hits with songs like *Leaning on a Lamppost* and *When I'm Cleaning Windows*. Purists will tell you that Formby actually played a banjolele - a banjo/ukulele hybrid - but the distinctive plinkety-plink sound was effectively lodged in the



Music

PHOTO: UKULELE ORCHESTRA OF GREAT BRITAIN



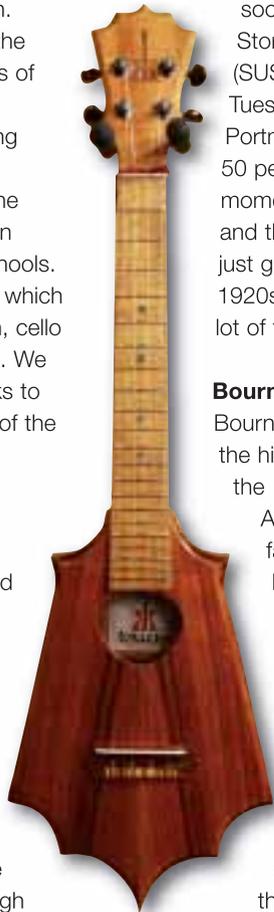
Ukulele Orchestra of Great Britain

national psyche.

Ironically, while the rise of the electric guitar in the mid 20th-century is generally credited with temporarily killing interest in the ukulele, its fans have included Jimi Hendrix, Eric Clapton (who played one on a 1960s Bonzo Dog Doo-Dah Band album) and Beatle George Harrison, who was a huge Formby fan.

Whatever the effects of the vagaries of fashion, the sales of these “bonsai guitars” are continuing to rise. From being considered something of a novelty, the ukulele is now the favoured starter instrument in many of Britain’s primary schools. “It offers an ideal basis from which to progress to a guitar, violin, cello and many other instruments. We regularly sell education packs to schools; they use it instead of the traditional recorder.”

The instrument is also increasingly favoured by contemporary bands like Icelandic outfit Sigur Rós and chart act Eliza Doolittle. It also crops up with remarkably regularity in soundtrack music and adverts. “It’s amazing how often ukuleles are used.” says Paul, who originally cut his musical teeth as a rock guitarist and for a while became a punk. Now, through



his own band and the influence of his wife, jazz singer Lisa McQuillan, he is increasingly drawn to acoustic-style music. “We like to give a ukulele tilt to songs old and new. We’re into ukulear fusion,” he laughs.

Paul also offers the opportunity for Dorset-based enthusiasts to play and socialise at the Southern Ukulele Store Bournemouth Ukulele Social (SUSBUS) which meets on the last Tuesday of every month at the Portman Pub in Boscombe. Up to 50 people turn up. “I think at the moment the oldest is in their 80s and the youngest is about 14. We just go through loads of songs from 1920s right up to modern day. It’s a lot of fun.”

Bournemouth’s Rare Ukulele

Bournemouth has long been part of the history of the ukulele. Back in the 1930s Hungarian nobleman Aladar de Vekey owned a small family run music shop in the Burlington Arcade in Boscombe which became a centre for quality ukuleles. Indeed to this day De Vekey ukuleles remain incredibly sought-after. They are so rare that in some circles it is rumoured (almost certainly wrongly) that only six were ever made. One of those was owned by George



Ukulele pioneer Aladar de Vekey

PHOTO: PAUL TUCKER

Harrison. In another quirk of fate De Vekey, who was also the first person to import Martin guitars into the UK from America, lived just along the road from the Southern Ukulele premises in Southbourne, where you will find a picture of him on the wall. □

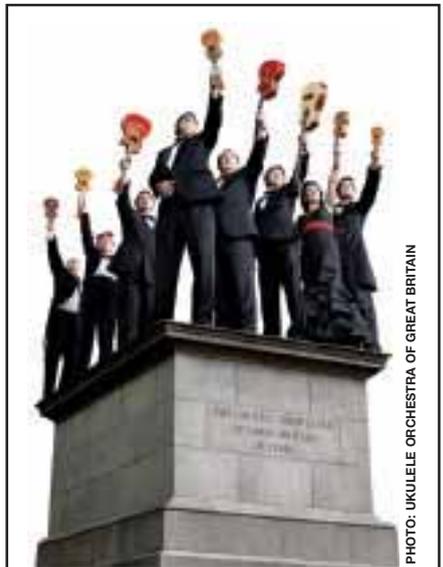


PHOTO: UKULELE ORCHESTRA OF GREAT BRITAIN

Further Information

The Southern Ukulele Store is at Music Is Life, 190 Seabourne Road, Southbourne, Bournemouth BH5 2JB, 01202 399019 or visit southernukulelestore.co.uk. The Ukulele Orchestra of Great Britain will be performing at Lighthouse at Poole on October 8 more details can be found at lighthousepoole.co.uk or call 0844 406 8666 to book tickets

PHOTOS: HATTIE MILES