

Ukuleles in the Library

By Marc Horton

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The ukulele has had a colorful, dramatic history over the years; one minute it's all the rage, the next it's a quirky cultural artifact from the past. In libraries, however, it has made a resurgence in recent years. It's manageable size, portability, and ease of use for users of all ages has brought the uke into many libraries as a circulating item and brought ukulele groups into the library to share their interest with the community.

Add Some Live Music to Storytime. Adding a ukulele to your storytime repertoire can be a quaint alternative to playing a CD or streaming pre-recorded music; seeing how entranced kids will be the first time hearing someone playing an instrument is an added bonus. Even a couple of basic chords is enough to master several storytime staple tunes, and if you keep a couple of extra instruments around, bring them out for storytime and prepare for caregivers to ask to learn and play along, to sing with the kids at home.

Extended Classes or One-Off Programs. That's right—even YOU can teach ukulele! Like the cliché about the music teacher who is only one lesson ahead of the students, you will soon know more than enough to get beginners started. It's possible to play dozens of songs with a combination of basic chords under your belt, like C, F and G, ranging from children's lullabies to folk classics, to recent pop hits. Whether in a one-off introductory program, or a multi-session class setting, it's easy for interested beginners to walk away with enough knowledge to continue their learning on their own.

Community Strum-Along. The popularity of the uke means that there are probably already people in your community who play, so why not invite them to do it in the library? The community strum-along is a great informal way to encourage beginners to learn alongside more seasoned players. Put the word out in local churches, senior centers, or swap meets and before you know it, you just might have the makings of a regular low-maintenance, high-enjoyment program at your library.

Wealth of Online Resources. Once prepared with the basics, the uke learner will find uke culture to be a vast ocean of recreational and educational support for their continued learning. Even a quick glance through the web, especially YouTube, will reveal the sheer numbers of video tutorials, song transcriptions and ukulele lessons that exist for the benefit of the novice learner and experienced player alike, whether they want to brush up on their strumming techniques, learn new songs, or experiment with different tunings. Even in the library social media world, resources like Facebook group Librarians with Ukes are a great place to find inspiration without having to reinvent the programming wheel.

Whether you want to host classes for patrons of all ages, or just give your storytime a musical boost, the ukulele is an easy, fun way to bring the confidence of learning a musical instrument to your patrons. Whether you want to create circulating instrument kits, or just have a library set of instruments for programs, there are instruments that are solid yet affordable for your library's (or its Friends' group's) price range; check with your local music store for the right instrument for your library needs, or even the possibility of instrument donation. It's a gateway instrument to a lifetime of musical enjoyment!

Marc Horton is a Children's Librarian at the Wilmington Branch of the Los Angeles Public Library, which is the first branch in the system to offer circulating ukuleles, thanks to a 2015 IMLS/LSTA grant. But he also likes doing stuff that doesn't involve ukuleles, occasionally.

