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Those Four Irresistible Strings

By ALLEN SALKIN

EVERYTHING began falling into place for Jen Kwok once she decided to buy a pink ukulele.

Last summer she was living in Hell's Kitchen, working as a finance manager for a nonprofit arts company and having little success with her forays into stand-up comedy.

Then her boyfriend bought himself a natural wood ukulele. She started strumming it, and found it easy to play with little training.

Within a month Ms. Kwok had fulfilled a childhood desire to own a pink instrument, acquiring a ukulele in that color and adding it to her act. Her corny jokes ("I don't understand why they call it lubricant. It should be lubri-can.") worked better when she strummed.

By November, NBC was flying her to Burbank, Calif., to perform for casting directors at a talent showcase. She has since quit her job and is now auditioning for sitcoms and movie parts.

"The ukulele is a happy instrument," she said last week. "People's eyes light up when I step up with it."

Suddenly there's something irresistible again about ukuleles. What Ms. Kwok stumbled into is an international voraciousness for all things having to do with the tiny four-string instrument. From wildly popular Web videos to car commercials and concert stages, the ukulele, born in Hawaii more than a century ago, is gently plunking heartstrings everywhere.

"You can't walk down the street with a ukulele without being asked about it," said Chris Johnson, who plays the instrument with [the Deedle Deedle Dees](#), a Brooklyn-based rock band for children. "I teach some kids music lessons, usually starting with piano, but they are all interested in ukulele."

What the world seems to need now is something tiny, fun and inexpensive.

"In darker times there is something appealingly light about it," said Jim Beloff, who wrote "The Ukulele: A Visual History" and sells ukulele merchandise at [fleamarketmusic.com](#). "There's a lightness and a sweetness about the sound, and it doesn't hurt that the association people have is

with Hawaii, which is a beautiful place. It's kind of a vacation in your mind."

SALES of ukuleles are up in recent years, said Chris Thomas, a spokesman for C. F. Martin & Company, the guitar maker. After stopping production on high-end ukuleles for about a decade, the company noticed resale prices for its vintage models were rising, reaching up to \$8,000. Two years ago the company started making its "3" series again.

"There is an upsurge of interest in this instrument that has already had two major incarnations of popularity," said Stan Jay, the owner of Mandolin Brothers, an instrument shop on Staten Island.

The ukulele's first golden age started during World War I, when the instrument was demonstrated at the 1915 Panama Pacific International Exposition in San Francisco. Soon Tin Pan Alley bands adopted it, and, by the 1920s, Roy Smeck, whose nickname was the Wizard of the Strings, became famous by playing it in early sound movies.

The second era started at the height of the cold war, in the 1950s, when Arthur Godfrey played the ukulele regularly on his show "Arthur Godfrey and His Friends" and recommended a plastic Maccaferri Islander model, which sold millions.

Tiny Tim had a 1968 hit with his ukulele version of "Tiptoe Through the Tulips With Me," which played as something of a parody of 1950s earnestness, and managed, despite the song's huge success, to render the instrument uncool, Mr. Beloff said.

When Mr. Beloff, a former associate publisher of Billboard magazine, became fascinated with the ukulele and published his first ukulele songbook in 1992, "people thought we were nuts," he said. "The uke in 1992 was pretty off the pop culture radar."

Then suddenly it was back on.

The dawn of this third great ukulele era can be traced to 2006, aficionados say, with the appearance of a video on [YouTube](#) by Jake Shimabukuro, a Hawaiian-born ukulele player. He had recorded a video for the New York cable access show "[Midnight Ukulele Disco](#)" that shows him sitting in Strawberry Fields in Central Park playing an astonishing virtuoso version of "While My Guitar Gently Weeps."

In a phone interview from Kaimuki, the Honolulu suburb in which he lives, Mr. Shimabukuro, 31, said he had no idea the video had been posted on the Web until he started hearing from friends. As his fame spread, he was booked on [Conan O'Brien's](#) show, went on tour with [Jimmy Buffett](#), and earned the nickname [Jimi Hendrix](#) of the ukulele.

"When I was growing up, there was no such thing as a touring ukulele player," said Mr. Shimabukuro, who last week played at the Newport Jazz Festival. "It's been an amazing experience."

“All of those places I go to, the ukulele is huge,” he added. “All these teenagers coming to the show with their ukuleles, asking me to sign them. It’s amazing to see that.”

A great thing about the ukulele is how easy it is to learn, said [Warren Buffett](#), the Berkshire Hathaway chairman, who started playing in college. “You can learn how to play it very quickly, even if only badly, as in my case,” he wrote in an e-mail message. “It takes only 15 minutes to actually learn how to play simple songs. You can sing along with it and carry it around easily.”

On the current “American Idol” concert tour, Jason Castro, the fourth-place finisher on the most recent season of the television series, has been using a ukulele to play “Over the Rainbow,” an ode to the lilting version recorded by Israel Kamakawiwo’ole, who had only small fame outside Hawaii before his death in 1997 at age 38. He did not live long enough to see his recording used in numerous movies and television shows.

The instrument’s popularity has spread not only across the Pacific Ocean, but also across the Atlantic. The popular United Kingdom-based Web site Ukulele Hunt last week posted ukulele sheet music for eight national anthems in honor of the Olympics.

A recent commercial for Saturn features the ukulele song “Five Years Time” by the British band Noah and the Whale. The song, with silly lyrics about elephants in love and sunny days, is a warm dose of frivolity. It delivers a similar message to the 1960s peace anthem “Give Peace a Chance” without saying anything about peace, or chance.

“And it was fun fun fun when we were laughing,” the song goes. “It was fun fun fun oh it was fun.”

In the case of ukuleles, it can also be inexpensive. Low-end ukuleles sell for as little as \$40. Ones used by professional musicians start at about \$200. Even sought-after models made from traditional Hawaiian koa wood, by Kamaka, a company founded in 1916 by one of the pioneering ukulele makers, can be had for about \$600.

Many lapsed guitar players who learned the six-string in their 20s and now guiltily ignore it in the back of their closets, Mr. Beloff said, are attracted to an instrument that is — if you just go by the string count — one-third easier to play.

“If you were a poor guitar player,” he said, “you suddenly become a pretty good uke player.”

Ukuleles are easy in other ways. “You can throw them in the overhead compartment of the airplane,” said Becca Stevens, a folk singer who features a ukulele in her act. As a New York resident, she added, “it can be a hassle getting all of your stuff out of the apartment to the gig if you play tuba and harp.”

There is, Mr. Buffett of Berkshire Hathaway noted, one drawback to the ukulele that he learned early, something that might give someone pause before picking it up. “I thought it would impress

girls,” he wrote, “but no such luck.”

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