

## Great Things come in Little Cases

I was a product of the grunge movement. Born in the 80's, Nirvana's *Nevermind* and Pearl Jam's *Ten* were released in my formative years of establishing lifelong musical tastes. The rock music of this era perfectly reflected the frustration, energy, and apathy that so often embodies one's teenage years. Of course, that was over a decade ago and the grunge movement has long since been dead. Musical trends come and go, and in 2011 I was surprised to see Pearl Jam front man Eddy Vedder assume a completely different musical persona. In *Ukulele Songs*, Vedder has taken on the ukulele as a solo instrument in a solo format. The end result portrays a much more intimate, introverted view of the musician known so well for his outward expression of turbulent emotion.

Vedder's latest release is part of a new phenomenon that has crashed the national scene. Ukuleles are popping up everywhere in pop culture. This can also be seen in the work of Jake Shimabukuro, whose ukulele rendition of "While My Guitar Gently Weeps" went viral on You Tube in 2006. An avid supporter of music education and sharing his craft, Shimabukuro's skill on the instrument makes him the Joe Satriani of guitar or the Bela Fleck of banjo. Thanks in part to those such as Vedder and Shimabukuro, the ukulele's popularity has been making a comeback in a big way. It seems like everyone from professional to amateur is on board with the guitars smaller cousin. So why the recent surge?

The ukuleles rush into the spotlight can largely be attributed to accessibility. One aspect is the economy. Ukuleles can run pretty cheap. Lower end models start at about thirty dollars, while the more expensive models can run closer to five-hundred dollars. Regardless, a decently functioning ukulele doesn't have to break the bank. This is a stark contrast to guitars or basses, which often also require additional equipment. It makes even more sense when one considers that the last ukulele surge occurred in the early 1900's, right around The Great Depression.

Also appealing is the general mood and social implications set by uke music. With the economy, many people are facing hard times. It's hard to be in a bad mood when listening to ukulele music, as the timbre is generally happy. The instruments size also adds to its popularity. One simply has to pull their uke out of a backpack for a group sing-along to ensue.

The demand can be seen in music stores across Madison. Ward-Brodt Music Mall has an entire section dedicated to the instruments, and Madison Music has reported a 300% sale increase in ukuleles from three years ago. Ukulele classes have also become all the rage. Part of the reason is that ukuleles, which have four strings, are very musically accessible, and can be played much easier than guitars, their six string counterparts. If you are interested in escaping the cold and taking part in the ukulele trend, Rhapsody Arts Center, located in Verona, will be hosting a *Rummin' and Strummin'* class from February 2<sup>nd</sup> through March 8<sup>th</sup>. Registration is available online at [rhapsodyarts.org](http://rhapsodyarts.org) or by calling (608) 848-2045.