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THE UK'S UKULELE MAGAZINE

# UKE



## Marc Gallagher Covers Star

*featuring...*

### GOING SOLO

DOLEMAN'S  
DECADE  
AS A SOLO  
PERFORMER



### PETER LUONGO

THE  
ORIGINAL  
UKULELE  
TEACHER



### KIT'S TIPS

UKULELE  
LESSONS  
LEARNED  
FROM  
KIT LUC



### GEAR ZONE

ANOTHER  
TOP FIVE  
UKULELES  
REVIEWED





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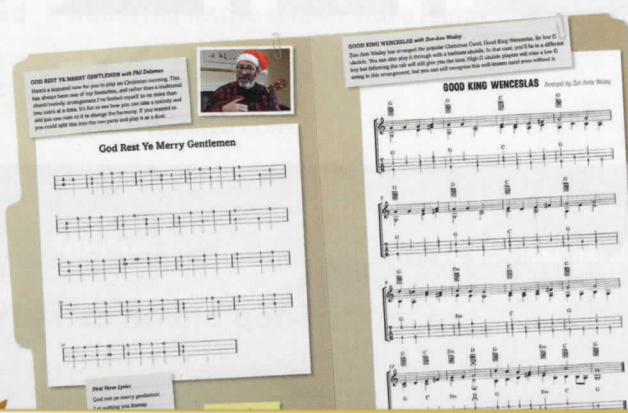
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# The Educator

Peter Luongo speaks to Editor Matt Warnes



After my discussion with Canadian Peter Luongo, one of the world's most experienced and preeminent ukulele teachers, I followed up with a request for photographs. Peter put out a call to friends and colleagues in the ukulele world, including plenty of big names you'd be familiar with. The fact that the replies and photographs came flooding in within minutes speaks of the respect with which Peter's lifetime in musical education is held. The fact that he was taken aback by these rapid responses spoke volumes that his enthusiasm and lengthy list of achievements have not made him any less humble than he was when he first started performing as a teenager in Vancouver.

Peter grew up in an Italian household, learning to play the music of the Italian community on the accordion. He began gigging at the age of 14 on his own, before his brother joined him playing in a band. On leaving school, he pursued a career in education, focussing on musical education as a result of his experience as a performer. Studying at the University of British Columbia, he learned about classroom music instruction. His tutor recognised his potential and became his champion in the wider community. School districts approached him to go and teach students and one district, Langley, asked him to come and run their programme using the ukulele. They had thousands of students already learning the instrument and he could do it year-round, rather than for a matter of weeks. He was in.

'This was my mandate 41 years ago when I started with children,' Peter explained. 'The ukulele is the magic instrument, the magic tool that I utilise in the work I do. It's not just about teaching the ukulele. I just think that it's a great way to teach.'

'I really care that I can share my ability to teach music to the community, whatever the age group,' he continued, before providing a summary of his philosophy.

'A key part is musical literacy,' he began. 'For me it's not about whether you can strum three chords, it's whether you can understand that melody comes from those chords. Picking out a melody is a nice skill to



have, but if I can get you to understand how that melody came to be under your fingers? Then it means you no longer need me to be able to continue to grow. The final component of what I really believe in is the outlet to be able to share that music.'

Within two years at Langley, as well as classroom instruction, he was invited to work with some kids after school. That was the start of the Langley Ukulele Ensemble, the performance group featured in the movie *The Mighty Uke*. The group developed their skills and started performing at senior schools and community events. Then they began to be hired for performances with donations. Then they moved onto musical festivals and started touring.

One of these tours took them to Hawaii, where a parent of one of the students, an airline pilot, went ahead to help organise hotel rooms. In this pre-internet age, the parent gave some cassettes of the ensemble to the marketing manager of the Sheraton Waikiki. The manager liked what they



heard, got in touch, and began a 25-year relationship that saw the group going out regularly to perform there.

On one Hawaiian tour, Peter described an event that could have turned sour if not for the talent and determination of his students. 'I've had a group of performers in a theatre and had the audience of Hawaiian students screaming at them, go home,' he recalled. 'It happened while we were on public radio. The members of the audience had our kids scared. They looked at me and said "Mr Luongo, we should get out of here." I said to just play and not to worry about it. And they played and the audience quietened down. By the end of the show the audience were calling for an encore. The kids left there high as kites. Because what they had done was transformed an audience from not wanting anything to do with them to

wanting more of them. And I looked at them and said "Don't ever forget what you did today. You changed the attitude of people towards you by utilising your talent and showing them your true ability." I still meet those kids today who say for them that was a seminal moment. It changed who they were.'

Peter was mentored in his early career by J.Chalmers Doane, a Canadian educator who spearheaded the use of ukulele in the nation's school system. He based his music programmes on how they were taught by Doane, as Peter explained: 'It isn't just about strumming chords. It has chords in it, but it's not about that. It's about taking those chords and making people understand that melody comes from there. How do you understand melody? You need scales. You need some pedagogy that allows me to lead back to the melody from the scales and from the melody back to the chords. It is also learning about music theory. Melody, scales, harmony, singing, theory and playing solos, take all of that together and you're in a position to perform. To go and make the music magical. To have some fun. That's the essence of what I do. I develop the level of musical literacy so that they get what it is that their fingers are doing. It gets me a little bit excited!

'Guess what happens when you start to be successful?' he continued, 'you start to attract a better echelon of student. James Hill heard about the programme and went through it for 10/11 years and then said "I'm going to make this my career". It comes back to that notion that I give people the skills so they can run with it. He ran with it, and look what he created. It's not my achievement, it's his – all I did was light a fire, give some basic training, provide some impetus and motivation. What an educator does is light the fire.'

Peter retired from the Langley Ukulele Ensemble in 2013, retaining a role as President, while handing the reins as Director to his son Paul. But his interest and involvement in the ukulele world has certainly not dimmed. I had arranged our interview early in the morning in the Pacific Northwest, but by the time we spoke he'd already had a meeting with the NAMM organisation about designing curricula of ukulele

workshops and showcases for events over the coming years. The previous day he'd returned from Las Vegas where his adult group, the Legacy Ukulele Ensemble had been performing at a



PHOTO BY CRAIG CHEE

festival. During the rest of the day he would be putting the detail into festivals being organised in Ohio, Massachusetts and Michigan.

'I've gone from grassroots with kids, to adults, to education, to big picture educational programmes that bring us back to the grassroots. I continue to be really impressed to hear of the interest, the excitement and the enthusiasm that there is for the ukulele throughout the world,' he concluded. A healthy dose of that enthusiasm and excitement comes from Peter Luongo himself.

**MATT WARNES** EDITOR

## An Inspirational Story

"I remember a student arriving in Langley who came to Canada as one of the Vietnamese boat people, at the end of the war there. Her family had nothing and she barely spoke English. She was very quiet but showed promise with the ukulele. I took her into the ensemble, who became like a second family, helping to bring out her talent.

She graduated, went to university and then years later knocked on my door. 'I just wanted to thank you,' she said. 'If not for what you did with the ukulele programme my life would not be what it is today.' She'd been awarded a scholarship to study a Masters in Nursing at California. 'I'm driven, I'm confident. Because of the programme I am able to seek out and find success in life,' she'd explained.

If people ask why I do what I do, then stories like this are the answer. It helps me to realise that we all have the ability to do great things, we just need to unleash the God-given abilities that we have."