

The Ukulele

The ukulele is typically made of four nylon or gut strings. Many famed artists like Eddie Vedder and Jason Mraz have used this instrument to enrich their classical songs.

The uke provides an excellent starting point for music students and amateur musicians. Musicians of any age can quickly learn to play this instrument. The ukulele is available in four different sizes with different pitches, tones, fretboards, and tunes.

History of the Ukulele

The ukulele has a rich history and tradition. While this instrument first appeared in Hawaii in the eighteenth century, its roots are found in Portugal. However, it is not known as to who actually invented the uke.

Historians agree that the Portuguese *braguinha* or *machete de braga* is the instrument that led to the creation of the ukulele. The *braguinha* is a small instrument as compared to the guitar but operates quite similar to the first four stringers of the guitar.

On the other hand, the ukulele has the same scale length as the *machete* but is tuned GCEA instead of DGBD. In other words, we can say that the Hawaiians nicknamed the *braguinha* as ukulele.

By the mid-eighteenth century, Hawaii's sugar industry was booming, which created a shortage of workforce in the area. At the same time, Portugal was experiencing economic collapse. The economic downturn forced many Portuguese to immigrate to Hawaii to find employment opportunities in the sugar industry.

Many Portuguese arrived in Hawaii along with their families and *machetes*. Among them were three woodworkers named Manuel Nunes, Augusto Dias, and Jose do Espirito (originally from Madeira's port city, Funchal). A man named Joao Fernandes was also among the passengers. He played the *machete* and sang a thanksgiving song upon arrival at the Honolulu Harbor on August 23, 1879.

Fernandes's performance moved the Hawaiians so much so that it made them obsessed with the *branguinha*. The Hawaiians nicknamed the instrument as the "ukulele," which means "jumping flea." This term refers to the way Fernandes' fingers moved on the fretboard.

Many Portuguese immigrants lived in Hawaii, but Nunes, Dias, and Santos traveled to Honolulu to find work upon the completion of their contractual employment in Hawaii. They started woodwork and instruments making business in Honolulu. Their efforts further promoted the ukulele.

It is not clear as to who made the first ukulele. What we know is that it went from Portugal to Hawaii as a *branguinha*. Once in Hawaii and Honolulu, the *machete* changed in size and shape and got reentrant tuning that gave the ukulele its exclusive sound and ease of playability.

The Hawaiian king David Kalakauna was in love with the ukulele. He introduced the instrument into the Hawaiian music of that time, providing the instrument the backing of the royalty. This move made the ukulele an inseparable part of the Hawaiian music tradition.

While the popularity of the ukulele began to wane with the start of rock and roll in the 1950s, it has made a successful comeback in modern times.

Ukulele Fun Facts

The first ukulele is said to have been built in 1879; however, it is not clear who invented this instrument.

Renowned astronaut Neil Armstrong had a great passion for playing the ukulele.

C. F. Martin Guitars manufactured ukulele in the 1920s, and the sales of this instrument were on par with that of guitars.

Initially, the ukulele strings were produced from sheep or cat gut. The modern ukulele's feature strings made of nylon.

Questions about the Ukulele

- 1) All students - How many strings does a ukulele have?
a) 3 b) 4
 - 2) All students - How many different sizes of ukulele are there?
a) 4 b) 5
 - 3) Most students - Which two countries does the ukulele have its roots in?
a) Hawaii b) Brazil c) South Africa d) Portugal
 - 4) Most students - Why did lots of people move from Portugal to Hawaii in the mid-eighteenth century?
a) They wanted to spend more time in the sun.
b) Hawaii had a shortage in workforce, and Portugal was experiencing an economic collapse.
 - 5) Stretch and Challenge - What does *Ukulele* mean in Hawaiian, and why was it given this name?
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- 6) All students - What year was the first ukulele built?
a) 1868 b) 1879
- 7) Most students - What material were the strings initially made from?

- 8) All students - What material are strings now made from?

Ukulele Labelling Exercise – Label the parts of the ukulele.

