

Pop Talk: Shimabukuro delivers impeccable music - all on a ukulele

by George Varga

Forget the comparisons between Jake Shimabukuro and Jimi Hendrix and Eddie Van Halen. True, this 30-year-old Hawaiian virtuoso with the boyish looks and monster instrumental chops is easily the greatest ukulele player some people have ever heard. But it's more accurate to say he's the greatest ukulele player most people have never heard.

JAKE SHIMABUKURO - Never heard of Jake Shimabukuro? Too bad, because with ukulele in hand, he rocks. CNS Photo courtesy of Michael Bloom. Because, well, let's face it: Unless you're young enough to be a fan of SpongeBob SquarePants and Dan Zanes, or old enough to be a fan of Arthur Godfrey, Don Ho or Tiny Tim, chances are you haven't heard any ukulele players - good, bad or, in Shimabukuro's case, remarkable. And while he has collaborated on stage or on record with such varied admirers as Ziggy Marley, Les Paul, Jimmy Buffett, Bela Fleck, Kaki King and the members of the String Cheese Incident, this Honolulu-born, fourth-generation Japanese-American isn't deterred by the relative obscurity of his chosen musical instrument.

"I look at it as more of an advantage," said Shimabukuro (pronounced She-ma-boo-koo-row).

"Because when people see you come out on stage with a ukulele, for one thing, they are not expecting much - whereas if you came out with an electric guitar, people would automatically start comparing you with other players. With the 'uke,' people are more open to whatever you are able to offer. It's not an intimidating instrument, it's very humble, and people aren't as standoffish when they are listening to it, or as critical. So I feel less pressure."

With or without pressure, Shimabukuro has transformed the ukulele's musical potential in ways that - until he came along - seemed almost unimaginable.

Shimabukuro is able to perform jazz, blues, rock, classical, bluegrass and more with authority and conviction on his four-string, two-octave ax.

His own compositions - such as "Sunday Morning" and the high-velocity, funk-inflected "Grandma's Groove" (a standout track from his latest album, "Gently Weeps") - are impressive. So are such gentle ballads as "Breathe" and Erroll Garner's "Misty," both from Shimabukuro's new album, on which he achieves the harmonic richness of a veteran jazz or classical guitarist.

Although "Gently Weeps" is his fifth album on his own Hitchhike Records label, it is his first to feature almost exclusively solo ukulele pieces, with no overdubbing or instrumental support. It also finds him playing

with new maturity and restraint, rather than trying to dazzle his listeners every moment. He credits the growing sophistication in his work to noted Japanese jazz pianist Makoto Ozone, whom he credits as a mentor.

"Makoto invited me to hang with him in New York for five days in late 2005," Shimabukuro said. "He made me realize that the most important thing in music is respecting the space and silence between the notes you play. And that was really huge for me.

"I used to try to play everything as fast as I could to make it exciting and to try to keep things moving all the time. Makoto taught me about balance and taste. It's OK to play fast, but you have to balance that with playing something very sensitive and with a lot of emotion. Even playing fast, you can play with a lot of emotion. But you have to play with control. And I think that was lacking in my playing."

Control and sensitivity are the essence of Shimabukuro's solo version of The Beatles' "While My Guitar Gently Weeps," which brought him international exposure when a fan posted a video on YouTube.com of Shimabukuro performing the George Harrison-penned classic in the Strawberry Fields section of New York's Central Park. The low-budget video was made for "Midnight Ukulele Disco," a public-access TV show in New York.

"It was shot, like, three years ago and I don't even know how it got on the Internet," Shimabukuro said from his Honolulu home. "This has been such a great tool for me to expose what I do to people. And it's seen all over the world. I've received e-mails about it from Europe, Canada, even Korea and Vietnam."

His version of "While My Guitar Gently Weeps" also captivated Olivia Harrison, the widow of George Harrison, who died of cancer in late 2001. She flew to Hawaii last fall specifically to catch Shimabukuro's concert with the Honolulu Symphony, which featured an expanded arrangement of her late husband's song for ukulele and orchestra.

"She came back afterward and said some really nice things and that she was so happy she attended. George Harrison was my hero - he was everyone's hero," Shimabukuro said. "So to hear from her about how he loved the ukulele, and how she wishes I could have met him, was unbelievable. I was so inspired, just by talking with her and her attending the concert. Wow, what an experience!"

Harrison wasn't the only rock star drawn to the ukulele.

In recent years, everyone from Eddie Vedder and Elvis Costello to Sting and Paul McCartney have played the instrument during their concerts. But their use of the ukulele has been fleeting, and they strum on it in a

basic, rudimentary fashion, rather than play the fleet arpeggios, intricate chordal clusters and blazing riffs that have become Shimabukuro's trademarks.

His musical love affair began after he played his first chord on a ukulele at the age of 4. He soon began striving to move well beyond its traditional supportive role in Hawaiian music.

"Anybody can play different genres of music on any instrument, but the key is to make it sound authentic," he noted. "And the ukulele itself has almost a bit of a novelty-type tone to it, if you were just to hear someone strum it. So my goal was to get away from that and try to create a sound that people could really take seriously.

"Now, it's like running a marathon," concluded Shimabukuro, who last year ran the Honolulu Marathon for the first time - and performed at the post-race concert. "You just go at your own pace and pick up as many gems along the way as you can. Because, in one way or another, all of your life experiences will enhance your music."

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