

On Another Note

Ukulele master Gerald Ross

San Slomovits, staff writer

The ukulele is the musical embodiment of the old adage, “Good things come in small packages.” Or, perhaps more accurately, “Good things come from small packages.” Long familiar as a simple instrument, perfect for accompanying three chord folk songs—à la Burl Ives—or as a comic musical prop—think Tiny Tim—the ukulele also has a long history of virtuoso players in Hawaii and the mainland who have explored and exploited the potential of the instrument. In the past couple of decades another generation of master players have brought the instrument much more visibility and have elevated it to new musical heights. One of those masters is long time local musician, Gerald Ross.

Ross, (who I’ve profiled in these pages before) has been playing traditional American roots music on guitar for decades. (With occasional forays into other genres. I remember him in the late 1970s playing Mozart’s “Rondo a la Turk” on solo guitar—no small feat—to accompany famed bones/ percussionist Percy Danforth.) He’s also accomplished on Cajun accordion and since 1997, on Hawaiian electric lap steel guitar. He’s only been playing ukulele seriously since December of 2004, but he’s clearly a very fast learner and has rapidly rocketed to the upper echelon of uke players nationally and even internationally, via the web. In the past few years he’s played and taught at ukulele festivals from Portland to New York, from Chicago to Dallas. He has released several recordings of his ukulele and lap steel driven



music and his latest is perhaps his most charming.

Mistletoe Mazel Tov is, of course, a holiday album. And, perhaps like you, I get pretty tired of hearing the same Chanukah and Christmas songs over and over every year, even, or perhaps especially, in the various (and sometimes weird) versions that come out every fall. In contrast, *Mistletoe Mazel Tov* is a very refreshing surprise. The minute I put it on our home CD player, my wife, daughter and I began to smile. Soon we were dancing along to the music and, though we had no mistletoe hanging... (Who needs the mistletoe excuse, anyway?)

The CD starts with one of the more bluesy, swinging versions of “Sevion” I’ve ever heard, complete with a repeating descending

bass line that brings to mind “Hit the Road, Jack.” Ross’ rendition rolls along beautifully and manages to simultaneously be both nimble and yet insistent.



The 65-year-old classic, “Let It Snow” is clearly not yet ready to be retired if Ross’ solo ukulele arrangement is any indication. The motto of Ross’ record company, UkeTone Records, is, “Four strings are plenty enough.” No idle boast that. In the hands of a ukulele master like Ross, the instrument can assume almost orchestral dimensions and can provide melody, harmony and rhythm as capably as a guitar or piano.

And, if you know how, and Ross clearly does know how, the ukulele is also capable of a surprisingly wide range of tonal colors. Listen to the gorgeous bell-like sounds Ross gets on “Silver Bells.”

“Late Night Latke Party” introduces Ross’ considerable abilities on the Hawaiian lap steel guitar. The impeccably arranged tune, as all of them are on this disk, is a delicious mixture of guitar, tenor uke and the lap steel.

Ross says on the liner notes that he rewrote the bridge of “Go Tell It On The Mountain” because to him it sounded too much like Stephen Foster’s “Oh! Susannah.” Nice job, Gerald. The new bridge sounds good and

does not sound like “Oh! Susannah.” However, to me, the verse melody still sounds like “If I knew You Were Coming I’d Have Baked a Cake.” Nevertheless, another clever, pleasing arrangement that helps us to freshly hear a familiar holiday earworm.

“Chanukah Oh Chanukah” has never sounded as good as it does here, and might be the first Dobro and ukulele version ever.

Ross says on the liner notes, “Makes sense to me.” Me too.

If I have one kvetch about this CD it’s that it’s too short. Or maybe it’s just that time flies when you’re having fun. More, Gerald, more! ■

To buy *Mistletoe Mazel Tov*, or any of Ross’ previous CDs, visit www.geraldross.com.