



## Gerald Ross

Absolute Uke  
(UkeTone Records)

**A** longtime mainstay on the uke scene, Gerald Ross can usually be found playing and teaching at a workshop, camp, festival, summit, retreat, or gathering somewhere across the United States or Europe. Despite his busy schedule, Ross (who's also proficient on guitar and lap steel) somehow finds time to record, and *Absolute Uke*, his sixth uke album, is a textbook showcase for his engaging style and crafty arrangements.

*Absolute Uke* offers 14 percolating instrumentals of familiar jazz standards, Latin-flavored numbers, and show tunes—most feature Ross' own genial guitar accompaniment, while three of the tracks are for solo-uke excursions.

Jazz fans will immediately recognize the changes on songs like Billy Strayhorn's "Take the 'A' Train" (a staple of Duke Ellington's band), swing classic "Rose Room" (popularized by Benny Goodman's Sextet), and George Gershwin's "Sweet and Lowdown," a rollicking

piano tune that translates amazingly well to our favorite four-string and finds Ross at his fleet-fingered best.

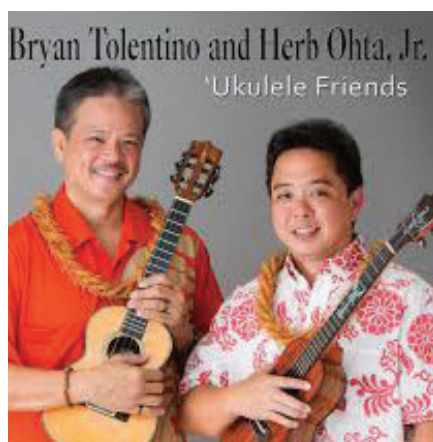
Of particular note is the Latin-tinged fare: Antônio Carlos Jobim's bossa-nova smash "Wave" sounds as if it were written for uke, while Manuel Ponce's beloved 1912 composition "Estrellita," arranged here for solo uke, positively glows in Ross' capable hands.

The breezy "You Belong to My Heart," based on a Mexican bolero, features a nifty, relaxed blend of single-string runs and chord melodies. Elsewhere, Ross turns "Matchmaker," from *Fiddler on the Roof*, into a delicate and melancholy waltz, while the popular fiddle tune "Westphalia Waltz" lopes merrily along.

All too often, standards arranged for ukulele can sound like novelties or thin approximations.

But Ross' arrangements sound totally organic, conveying the true spirit of the tunes while displaying his impressive uke technique.

—M.G.



## Bryan Tolentino and Herb Ohta Jr.

'Ukulele Friends  
(Neos Productions)

**A**bout twenty years ago, Bryan Tolentino met Herb Ohta Jr. when Ohta was teaching out of the legendary Harry's Music Store in Honolulu. Fast friends, they wrote their first song together, "G Minor Fleas," two years later, sitting on a bench in Blaisdell Park. However, *'Ukulele Friends* is their first full-blown collaboration, a lighthearted 12-song collection of well-worn Hawaiian and hapa haole instrumentals. Ohta, son of the fabled uke master Ohta-San, takes the lead parts, while Tolentino provides the accompaniment—or as he likes to call it, "fairy dusting."

For the most part, these are absolute staples of the uke songbook. The jaunty "In a Little Hula Heaven," for example, is quintessential hapa haole, written by Leo Robin and Ralph Rainger for the 1937 picture *Waikiki Wedding* starring Bing Crosby. The swinging "Manuela Boy" was composed by the "Hawaiian Jazz King," Johnny Noble, one of the first to mix Hawaiian music with mainland jazz and blues.

Among the most memorable songs is "Wahine Holo Lio" (loosely translated as "horsewoman"), which is based on a well-known chant for Queen Emma that celebrated her equestrian prowess. The gorgeous "Kaulana Kawaihae," popularized by the late Israel Kamakawiwo'ole, features a gentle, spare melody with accompanying chords that sound almost like classic country music—Tolentino and Ohta deliver a truly heartwarming and tender rendition. The high-spirited "He Aloha No 'O Wai'anae" was written by local legend Larry Arieta and recorded with the Tropical Serenaders.

Of course, the album would not be complete without a remake of the song that sparked this collaboration two decades ago: the fiery "Gm Fleas Revisited," on which the pair is joined by one Jake Shimabukuro. Overall, the album doesn't stray too far from the beaten path, but the seamless interplay of these longtime musical pals is still a joy to behold.

—M.G.