

By [Deb Medenbach](#)

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Ukelele lovers share their craft at Ashokan

Gerald Ross first picked up a ukulele as a quick grab he could noodle around on when he was working through a song. No need to take his guitar out of its case. Just leave the uke out on the coffee table. What he didn't realize is that ukes are so addictively easy to learn and so adaptable to all music genres that he tumbled right down the Hawaiian rabbit hole. He was hooked and he wants you to be, too.

"I've been teaching at uke fests all over the country," said Ross, who first started as a guitar and uke teacher at the center's Western Swing Week, has headed Ashokan Center's annual uke fest for the last four years and lined up an array of instructors for Memorial Day Weekend that appeal to neophyte plinkers and advanced players alike.

"At Ashokan, it's getting bigger every year but not by much. We never meant it to be huge. It would lose the intimacy that Ashokan's known for. It's a friendly, people-oriented place," Ross said. "At Uke Fest, you can have lunch with your favorite performer. I like the informality of it all. You don't have to be afraid to ask 'What is that chord?' or you can go up to a performer and say, 'I love that song on your CD, but how do you do that riff?' and they'll be happy to show you."

The first thing Uke Fest guests experience is a relaxed front-porch jam session with all of the teachers near the registration area. Perch on a step, bring out your instrument and play along with some of the best uke players in the country.

"This feels great!" said Ashokan Center Board President Jay Ungar, who is among the musicians in the welcoming group. "There are some regulars who keep coming back. This is their ukulele home. And there are always new people coming in and it keeps it really vibrant."

Each day includes workshops and plenty of time for jam sessions and conversation around meals. The Uke-Stravaganza concert on Saturday night showcases the talents of this year's instructors Ross, Victoria Vox, Paul Hemmings, Ben Hassenger, Rachel Manke and Del Rey.

The festival draws about 90 ukulele enthusiasts from around the Northeast, nearly doubling in size from the first festival four years ago. The instructors come from all over the country, with a strong West Coast presence. "There is a lot going on all over the West Coast for uke players. It's only just gotten started here," Ungar said.

This year, youth scholarships allow young players between the ages of 13 and 25 to attend either at a discount or for free. The younger teenagers have to come with an adult, whether it's their parents or a music teacher.

"There's a lot of camaraderie at these camps," Ungar said. "Not everything is learned from someone on a stage. People share a lot and help one another. People have a chance to relax with people with similar interests and they go home learning more than they thought."



Ukulele enthusiasts from around the Northeast come to the Uke Fest at the Ashokan Center.

If you go

What: Ashokan Center's 4th Annual Uke Fest When: May 27-30 Where: Ashokan Center, 477 Beaverkill Road, Olivebridge Price: Weekend registration is \$475. Uke Stravaganza Public concert featuring this year's uke fest instructors, 8 p.m. May 28 at Conservation Hall on the Ashokan Center campus. Tickets are \$15, \$10 youth. Information: Ashokancenter.org.

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