



UkeTalk Interview with Gerald Ross

June 2006

Thanks to Gerald Ross for this interview!
Visit [Gerald Ross](#) on the web for some great ukulele music!



UkeTalk: Gerald, tell us about your musical beginnings.

Gerald Ross: In the late 1960's it seemed like every kid had a guitar and the kids in my neighborhood were no exception. A friend of mine showed me two chords on his guitar, a 'D' and 'A'. I was hooked. I went to his house every day for a week just to strum those two chords over and over again. I begged my parents to buy me a guitar. My birthday was approaching and I was eyeing a thirty dollar acoustic guitar at Montgomery Wards. I asked my parents if they would pay for half of it. They reluctantly agreed thinking that I would give up this project in a few weeks. I proved them wrong and progressed quickly. I learned everything the local kids knew and checked out every guitar book from my local library. I have never had formal lessons on the guitar.

A year later I was playing bass in a high school rock band. I wanted to play guitar with the group, but at the band's first audition eight guitar players including myself showed up. I realized that I had a better chance of getting into the band if I played bass. That night I bought a used twenty dollar Japanese electric bass and by the next day I was the band's bass player. A few months later an event changed my life. Our band was hired to play a Saturday night dance at a local teen center. We played our five song repertoire over and over again for four hours. At the end of the night the director of the teen center came up to me and placed eleven dollars in my hand. I looked at the money and couldn't believe it! I thought, "I had the time of my life, people applauded me, the girls all think I'm wonderful, and I have eleven dollars! This is the life for me!"

UkeTalk: So when did the ukulele become an important instrument to you?

Gerald: I always used ukulele on my steel guitar recordings, primarily for rhythm. About a year and a half ago I recorded two songs as solo uke pieces, 'Aboriginal Blue' and 'Ukulele Stomp'. I posted these tunes on various Internet Uke bulletin boards and received rave reviews. Thanks to the uke a whole new musical world has opened up for me. I have made many good friends and have traveled to and played some very nice gigs. ([Listen to "Aboriginal Blue" while you read!](#))

UkeTalk: Is there one artist or song that really brought your attention to the uke?

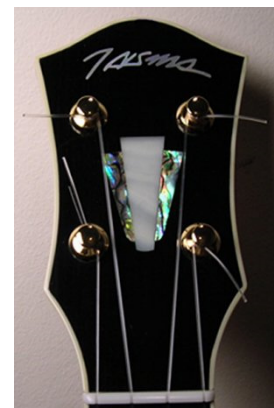
Gerald: I like Roy Smeck for his virtuosity and his showmanship and Cliff Edwards for his ability to really deliver a song.

UkeTalk: What are the main ukes that you presently play?

Gerald: Today my main uke is my custom built Talsma Tenor. It has a curly redwood top, grade 5 Koa sides and back, ebony fingerboard and a 1.5" nut. The uke is a pleasure to see and play. I also have a Bushman Jenny Concert (one of the first batches to arrive in the USA) and a Lanikai Koa Tenor that I outfitted with a K&K Big Shot internal pickup. I had a new nut made for both the Jenny and Lanikai to widen the string spacing. All my ukes are tuned re-entrant C tuning.

UkeTalk: Do you have any rare or unusual ukuleles in your collection?

Gerald: Sorry, no. Just the ukes I mentioned. I do however have a number of rare lap and acoustic steel guitars. I have two Rickenbacker Bakelite lap steel guitars, a 1947 and a 1935 (the first year of issue). I also have a 1937 Gibson EH-150 lap steel with an original Charlie Christian pickup. I have two pre-war National acoustic steel guitars; a 1931 Duolian with the crinkle paint finish (great for Delta Blues) and a 1928 National Style 2.5 Tricone for acoustic Hawaiian music (engraved flowers, shiny mirrored finish).





UkeTalk: Do you have one favorite ukulele size, or do you mix it up a bit?

Gerald: I prefer a tenor uke. I like the larger sized body, the wider nut and more comfortable string spacing. The tenor also retains the uke personality and tone. I tune re-entrant G. I don't play baritones because to me they sound too guitar-like. Sopranos feel a bit too tiny in my hands.

UkeTalk: What are your string brand preferences?

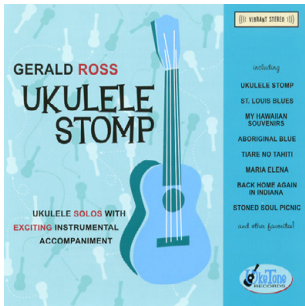
Gerald: The Bushman Jenny was my re-introduction into the uke world back in December of 2004. It arrived strung with Aquillas. I liked the sound until I started recording. I noticed that the textured feel of the Aquillas produced a scratchy-hissy sound that was greatly amplified by the microphone. I have since switched to Worth mediums for all my ukes. Worth strings have a very smooth feel, nice tight tension, have great tone and are virtually silent in terms of string noise.

UkeTalk: Is your solo uke style adapted from a fingerstyle guitar method?

Gerald: All of my ukulele chord knowledge is derived from my guitar background. However the short scale of the uke allows me to do amazing things I could never dream of on the guitar. I can construct chords with very large intervals. All I have to do is stretch my left pinky (laugh). The re-entrant fourth string also produces some very interesting chord inversions.



Regarding the ukulele fourth string, for many years I played with the Lost World String Band. The group started out playing old-time Appalachian music before branching into early jazz and swing. I heard and played with many old-time clawhammer banjoists during those years. I always liked the sound of the droning fifth string on the old-time banjo and have incorporated that sound into many of my uke arrangements. The fourth string on the uke is perfect for that droning sound.



UkeTalk: In 2005, you released a great CD of ukulele tunes called "Ukulele Stomp". Can we look forward to another CD coming soon?

Gerald: I'm working on a follow up to "Ukulele Stomp". Uke Stomp has received great reviews, lots of encouraging words and remarkably good sales. The new disk will have a similar mix of instrumental ukulele Swing, Blues, Ragtime, Hawaiian and Pop. I'm also adding more lap steel selections. My lap steel playing goes over very well at ukulele conventions and people have been requesting recordings of it. I love performing at ukulele festivals where I am the only steel guitarist. People think I'm an expert on the thing (laugh).

UkeTalk: Do you have your own home recording studio, or do you record at someone else's facility?

Gerald: I do all my recording in my home studio. It's a real luxury not having to worry about the ticking clock and flowing dollars that come with recording in a professional studio. I can relax and record numerous takes of a tune until I get it right.

My home studio is very low-tech compared to a professional studio. Before I record I must place a heavy quilt in front of the heating duct, cover the computer with a blanket to mask the cooling fan noise, take the phone off the hook and send the kids to the movies.

For microphones I currently use an Audio Technica Pro-37 condenser and a Shure SM-57. For software I'm using ProTools LE on my Windows XP machine. ProTools is a world-wide standard. It has a very long learning curve but it is quite powerful.



I recorded "Ukulele Stomp" and my solo guitar CD "Romance & Adventure" in my home studio. However, I did take the raw tracks to a professional studio for mixing and mastering. I suggest this approach to anyone who is thinking of self-producing a CD. Another set of ears always helps. This is especially true after you've listened to and tweaked the same song 10,000 times in your home studio.

UkeTalk: Do you regularly perform publicly and how much of that is strictly uke?

Gerald: I perform around the Ann Arbor and the SE Michigan area frequently in various configurations (solo, duos and small groups). Typical gigs would be playing solo Jazz guitar in a restaurant setting, playing guitar and steel for local Contra and folk dances, playing guitar, lap steel and uke with a Gypsy jazz trio, and playing guitar, steel and lead uke with local Swing groups. I also play uke and steel with the Ann Arbor based Hawaiian band 'Heartland' (I'm the token Haole in the group).

I thoroughly enjoy playing ukulele conventions and most recently performed at the NY Ukefest, the Ann Arbor Uke-Athon and the Midwest Ukefest. Not only do I enjoy my time in the limelight but I love jamming until the wee hours of the morning with my fellow performers and festival attendees.

I also enjoy lap steel guitar festivals and recently performed at the Shenandoah Valley Hawaiian Steel Guitar Summit in Virginia. I also perform annually at the Hawaiian Steel Guitar Association's Joliet, Illinois convention, the Aloha International Convention in Indiana and Scotty's Steel Guitar Convention in St. Louis.

Strictly uke? I have never had a gig that was 100% uke. I always throw in some Hawaiian steel guitar and guitar in my shows (like Roy Smeck?. I wish). When I play at ukulele festivals I play the uke for about 90% of my set with a bit of guitar and lap steel thrown in for flavor. I like to mix things up.

UkeTalk: Why is it that lap steel players often play ukulele as well? Is it some kind of genetic thing?

Gerald: It's the Hawaiian connection. The uke and steel were made for each other, what can I say? It's a tradition. I have many Hawaiian musician friends and it seems to be a given in that community to be a multi-instrumentalist. Also, most lap steel players come to the instrument from a guitar or uke background. It's rare to find a steel guitarist who only plays steel. The lap steel is too hard to learn unless you have a chordal based instrument history and the uke is perfect for that.

UkeTalk: So Gerald, here you are, a player who's achieved musical excellence on many instruments and I have no doubt that you could play anything you wanted to... Maybe you can tell me, what is it about the ukulele that gets inside a person and won't let go?



Gerald: I wish I could play any instrument I wanted (laugh). Every few years I decide that I should learn to play the violin. I give it a good few weeks and then throw in the towel. The sounds I get out of that fiddle are downright embarrassing.

Regarding the uke, I feel that its size has a lot to do with the appeal. Coming from a guitar background, it's very nice to be able to stretch five frets with your left hand. This opens up tons of possibilities in terms of chord and melody construction. Also with the current strict limitations on airline travel, the uke is a perfect travel instrument.

The re-entrant tuning with the high fourth string produces a very pleasant bell-like optimistic tone. Even minor chords sound positive on a uke. You can't be in a bad mood while playing the uke. It's very good therapy for these troubled times.

UkeTalk: Are you available for ukulele lessons, either in person or by other forms of correspondence?

Gerald: I don't believe that it is possible to "steal someone's licks". Everyone has different life experiences, different musical influences and tastes, different ears and different souls. That being said, I openly share my techniques and music with whoever asks. I know that when I show a person a chord or a lick they will make it their own. Many times they add some great ideas to mine. It's good Karma and a great way to make friends. That's the very cool thing about freely sharing your music.

I want people to feel free about emailing me with questions. I answer my email very quickly.

Note: You can email Gerald at gbross@umich.edu

UkeTalk: So you live in Ann Arbor, Michigan... Is there much of a uke scene there, or are you the torch runner?

Gerald: There are a few ukers here in town and around SE Michigan. There's a uke group that meets weekly a few towns to the east of Ann Arbor. There's the annual Ann Arbor Uke-Athon show held in the late winter.

Here's something that invariably happens when I play the uke on gigs. People come up to me and remark "that they never realized you could really play music on those things". So in a way I guess I'm holding the torch high and helping promote the instrument.

UkeTalk: I have a good guess at what some of your personal collection of music consists of, but if the Music Police searched your home, what records, tapes and CDs would they find that might surprise us?

Gerald: Looking at my CD shelf you'll find way too many guitar, uke and steel guitar disks, mostly early jazz, swing, blues and American roots music.

On the "dark side" of the shelf you'll find:

Opera CDs, my wife Margaret is a big opera fan and we have an entire shelf of opera disks.

The complete Jimi Hendrix catalog. Jimi Hendrix was alive and recording during my high school years. At the time I thought his music was total garbage. My oldest son plays the electric guitar and a few years ago began learning some of Hendrix's music. He played this music constantly at home. I began to appreciate the virtuosity and talent Hendrix had. Compared to much of the music coming out today, Hendrix's distorted over-driven guitar music is downright melodic.

A Mickey Mouse Club Disney LP from the late 1950's. If you can remember way back to the TV show, the leader of the Mouseketeers was Jimmy Dodd. Jimmy came from a swing-pop background. He was an incredible jazz/swing guitarist and a very clever songwriter. He wrote most of the songs heard on the show. In fact, I recorded his song "Fun With Music" on a *Lost World String Band* LP in 1981. I even sang this song when the Lost World performed on Garrison Keillor's *Prairie Home Companion* show in the 1980's.

Jazz accordion CDs. My family requires me to listen to these either alone or in the car, preferably both.

Thanks again to Gerald Ross for this interview!

You can visit [Gerald Ross](#) on the web to hear more great ukulele music, or you can make a direct click to [buy "Ukulele Stomp" on CD by Gerald Ross.](#)
