

The Ukulele by Susan Rice

“The ukulele seems a part of the native at every merrymaking. It hailed originally from Portugal, but one seldom remembers this, so native has it become to the islands.”

-Charmian London, wife of the writer Jack London, 1907

Beginning in 1878, contract workers and their families from the island of Madeira “the small island west of Morocco that is part of Portugal”, escaping the poverty and political instability of their homeland, came to Hawai`i to start new lives. Joy in their safe arrival was expressed by impromptu musical celebrations on the machete, a small four-stringed treble guitar that was a native folk instrument of Madeira. The Hawaiian Gazette reported in 1878, less than two weeks after the first arrivals reached Hawai`i:



During the past week a band of Portuguese musicians, composed of Madeira Islanders recently arrived here, have been delighting the people with nightly street concerts. The musicians are true performers on their strange instruments, which are a kind of cross between a guitar and a banjo, but which produce very sweet music in the hands of the Portuguese minstrels. We confess to having enjoyed the music ourselves and hope to hear more of it.



With their love of poetry and music, the Hawaiians took readily to this new instrument as an accompaniment to the sweet melodies of their native songs. In the early days it was referred to as the “taro patch fiddle,” but later came to be known as the ukulele, the Hawaiian word for jumping flea. Ernest Kaai wrote in his 1910 method book:

The Hawaiians have a way of playing all over the strings at the same time, strumming and skipping their fingers from one side of the instrument to the other, hence the name, ukulele (bouncing flea).

Several of the Portuguese immigrants were skilled cabinetmakers and began making ukuleles in Honolulu shops, using Hawaiian hardwoods, especially koa, which were purchased by the enthusiastic native musicians as well as visitors sailing to Hawai`i as part of the newly emerging tourist industry. But it was not until the opera *Bird of Paradise* began its Broadway run and subsequent tour that Hawaiian music found a large mainland audience, and this was followed in 1915 by the Panama-Pacific International Exposition in San Francisco which showcased a Hawaiian attraction of musicians and hula dancers. The national craze for Hawaiian music and the ukulele was underway.

