

A hula dance is part of the Ukulele Society of America's weekly meeting.



UKULELE, BABY

The musical instrument is celebrated—and played—during weekly jam sessions hosted by a Carlsbad nonprofit.

WRITTEN BY HEATHER BENSEN | PHOTOS BY LAUREN SCHROEDER

Everyone is invited to play during the jam session.



Every Thursday at the Stag & Lion Pub and Grille you can find a little bit of Hawaii in Carlsbad. That's the gathering place for the weekly hula and *kanikapila* (or jam session) of the Ukulele Society of America, a local nonprofit group that celebrates the plucky musical instrument.

For the past six years, the society has honored the Hawaiian roots of the ukulele while exploring a diverse array of musical genres. About 45 members come to the Stag & Lion each week, while more than 700 others log onto an online Yahoo group where members can explore music, download lyrics and chords, engage in discussion and enjoy their passion for the uke. The group is run by a six-member board whose mission is to spread ukulele culture.

The weekly meetings are something to witness. Before the music even begins, you can dive into your inner aloha and take a hula lesson. Later, when the *kanikapila* begins, don't fret if you've never touched a ukulele. The Ukulele Society of America welcomes everyone who is ready to give it a try and have a good time, regardless of their experience level.

"When someone is new, we focus on helping them along," says society President Lauren Wasserman. "When people are new, we don't want them to feel lost; we were all new at one time." The group always has loaner ukuleles on hand and part of the fun is admiring the variety of beloved ukuleles belonging to the regulars and more advanced players.

Elliot Lum, technical director of the board, adds, "This is what distinguishes us from a lot of other groups. Others only want the good people to go up or they have a band that plays. We encourage people to get up and have a good time. We are a very tolerant group because they allow even Lauren and I up on stage!"

The society isn't just about Hawaiian music. "Our niche is that we play all kinds of music," says Lum. "We include all genres and have more than 1,400 music files that we share on our online group." The technically savvy group also projects songs, with their lyrics and chords, onto TV screens during the weekly jam sessions to get everyone on the same page musically. You can also bring your own tablet device and use the app forScore to check the cue and synchronize with others in the audience.

The Ukulele Society of America collects \$2 dues per session and \$3 for hula lessons, although first timers are free. The group wants to spread its good vibes by giving back to the community. Members are working towards the goal of purchasing ukuleles to donate to Carlsbad's public schools and also plan to perform at senior centers. "We want the money to go back into the community to support music," says Wasserman.

Meetings take place every Thursday at 6 p.m. at the Stag & Lion, 850 Tamarack Ave. For more information, send mail to the Ukulele Society of America, P.O. Box 2174, Carlsbad, CA 92018 or visit the website at ukulele_society_of_america@yahoo.com.