



Ukulele Lady Cali Rose – Sandra Coopersmith



If you ask Cali Rose how to make a million dollars playing the ukulele, she'll laugh and tell you, "Start with two million!" Big bucks are clearly not the driving force behind this award-winning songwriter, professional singer, recording artist, teacher and keyboard and ukulele player whose shows, which combine vintage and popular songs with her own original tunes, also incorporate humorous stories and encourage audience participation.

She is doing exactly what she loves and, in the process, creating a wealth of joyful experiences for herself, her ukulele group (The CC Strummers as pictured above at this year's Fiesta La Ballona) and her lucky listeners.

"Ukulele is alive and well in Culver City," Rose proclaimed, "and I want people to know about it. The local ukulele scene is flourishing and bringing more and more people into the fold. Unlike any other musical instrument, almost everyone can learn a few chords and strums on the ukulele and make music for the rest of their lives. It's a gift that keeps on giving."

This creative and prolific entertainer will be performing songs from her latest CD, "Smile, Smile, Smile," and providing a rollicking, memorable experience at her CD release party and concert on Sunday, September 29 at Boulevard Music, 4316 Sepulveda Blvd. near Culver Blvd.

boulevardmusic.com/livemusic/462.html). Tickets are \$12 and can be purchased in person at Boulevard Music or by calling (310) 398-2583. A \$1 per ticket charge applies to phone orders. Doors open at 6:30 p.m. and the show starts at 7:00 p.m.

Several of The CC Strummers are heard performing on two tracks of this CD.

"The CC Strummers have made me a better player and teacher and human being," Rose said. "They are gaining popularity all around Southern California. We recently performed at Fiesta La Ballona (http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=JB-L_tJGa80) and were 45 strong, all senior citizens who are members of the Culver City Senior Center. We do rock and roll, country, Hawaiian songs and comedy, and actually sang in Spanish and Japanese at the show. As the teacher and music arranger, I have the pleasure of watching joy happen as folks learn to play the ukulele and sing together. This instrument engenders a sense of community and family."

And family brings us to musically pivotal memories that track back to her childhood in Washington, D.C. and her great-aunt, Helen, who was her first piano teacher.

"A no-nonsense lady, she insisted I wash my little hands before touching her beloved Steinway Baby Grand," Rose said, describing Aunt Helen as "the classical music prodigy in the family. I also learned that I could hum a song and then play it, which was a whole lot more fun than those finger exercises of hers. To this day, I play by ear."

After her family moved to California, Rose "tried to adjust to big crazy Los Angeles by hiding out in the den and playing the piano. Our Baldwin Acrosonic piano, which made the move with us across the country, became my best friend, along with a new \$19.95 Silvertone guitar from Sears. I had big dreams: I wanted to be a star but would be thrilled playing music in a bar, by golly!"

Since that wouldn't have meshed well with the expectations of her academic family, she headed off to college. Armed with a B.A. in psychology, she worked in a local hospital emergency room, and in her first week on the graveyard shift "learned more about psychology (mine and theirs) than I did in four years of school." Those familiar with her current packed schedule will not be surprised that Rose attended nursing school during the day while pulling graveyard shifts on the weekend. And then came her epiphany, when she realized that playing the guitar and singing for the residents at the V.A. hospital brought her unsurpassed enjoyment. She had found her calling.

"After three years of high drama in the E.R. very little shocks me," she said. She integrated those experiences effectively, maintaining "it was perfect preparation for my future work – singing in piano bars."

Her first job as a professional performer was indeed one to remember.

"It was in the red light district of Los Angeles, singing 'Kumbaya' to drunks and drug addicts," Rose said. "The prostitutes loved it. My first night on the gig I made \$27.50 and never looked back."

She met her husband, Craig Brandau, while performing at a piano bar. One evening he brought his guitar along, she asked him to sit in, and they started

making music in more ways than one. And he was the catalyst for her love affair with the ukulele.

Although Brandau teaches 10th grade world history and, according to Rose, loves his job, she found his true passion was the ukulele. "He began playing in earnest a few years ago and it rubbed off on me," she said. "I decided to learn a few chords. Ooh, that was fun, so I learned a few more. That's when I fell in love, head over heels in love, with the ukulele. It helps that I am a finger-picker from way back and a lot of my guitar technique comes in handy. But the ukulele is different and full of surprises. It comes gift-wrapped with a big bow. Each new chord or lick or strum I learn can open a door to a whole new world of sound and texture and rhythm. What a joy!"

And Rose is enthusiastically spreading that joy around, because a glance at her October calendar reveals a proliferation of commitments, including The CC Strummers ukulele group that meets Mondays and Thursdays, teaching a four-week "Ukulele For Beginners" workshop on consecutive Saturdays at Boulevard Music with the first meeting scheduled October 19, and six performance gigs.

Future ukulele-meisters will have some mighty big shoes to fill, not only when it comes to Rose's prodigious talent and output but also regarding her shoe size, which happens to be 9_. She has memorialized those impressive tootsies in her song, "Big Feet," from her CD of original tunes called "Smile, Smile, Smile," available at iTunes, CD Baby, Amazon and <http://www.calirose.com>. And one cannot help but smile when seeing her perform the song with her husband at The Lake Anne Ukulele Festival in Reston, Virginia in July (<http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=I0F9QPRUXeE>). "The weather was hot enough to make your feet grow," she recalled. "Shouldn't a petite woman have petite feet instead of waffle-stompers? But now that I'm meeting plenty of 10 plusses out there, I'm feeling positively diminutive."

Acknowledging that "like everyone else, I've had dark times a-plenty," Rose finds "this precious life is a mixed bag, for sure, but being an entertainer, musician and songwriter, I get to lather my feelings into a song or story and lighten the load with a little humor. I'm grateful for each word I sing and every note I play and for all who share their time, their stories and their applause with me."

Steve Fry, an accomplished musician, performer and longtime Culver City resident, is one of Rose's admirers. When asked for a quote, his response was, "No way! She deserves at least an essay, if not a book. She is a musical icon in our city who, like many local musicians including me, discovered early on that they just had to make music to maintain the essence of their soul. She is very talented and a consummate professional performer. But the reason everyone loves her as a performer and personally is that she is a genuinely wonderful, fun-loving, and substantial person. The naturalness of her personality carries over in her music."

Fry first met Rose at one of her shows in a series sponsored by the Culver City public library and found her to be "wonderful, with a self-effacing style which belied her obvious piano and vocal skills. Every eye was on her the entire performance. Later she came to one of my performances at the same venue, and we became friends."

At that time Fry was writing a weekly column on music called "Music To My Ears" along with feature articles on music for the Culver City News. "I was thrilled to be able to interview Cali in one of my columns," he said. "She was an outstanding interview, innately understanding what people needed to know about her work and herself. I remember presenting her, for her time and effort, with a coffee cup imprinted with a lovely red rose."

In April, 2010, Fry, who is on the board of the Culver City Historical Society as Vice President, Programs, booked Rose to do a show called "Songs That Made Culver City Famous," in which she talked about the songs and music from movies and TV shows made in Culver City and offered her own interpretations.

"People still talk about that show," he said. "It was one of the greatest programs ever presented to the Culver City Historical Society."

Fry, a longtime ukulele player, even availed himself of an opportunity to benefit from her teaching expertise.

"When I first excitedly got my rosewood Lanaki tenor uke I showed it to her in the parking lot under the City Hall," he said. "She liked it and began teaching me how to strum with that rhythmically defining cadence great Hawaiian uke players do. Not easy. I still practice with her directives."

He recalled that "at the Culver City Senior Center, which is very interested in music for seniors (I perform in many of their Saturday dance ensembles), she initiated what became the largest class ever produced at the center: the beginning uke class. Now she offers two uke classes, and her CC Strummers perform annually for the Fiesta La Ballona. All of this is a testament to her musical abilities and her drive to make music fun. Her husband Craig is no slouch as a uke player, too."

When that beginning class first started around 2010, it consisted of 15 people. After it outgrew the space at the center it was moved to the Veterans Memorial Building, where it now continues on Mondays, with the intermediate class also being held there on Thursdays. The two groups aggregate around 150 people.

This writer, who has the musical aptitude and experience of a lump of coal, came to the Thursday, September 19 class and was promptly handed a ukulele by Rose. Surprisingly, with relatively little effort, some pleasing sounds were produced. When I relinquished the ukulele to one of the class members who had forgotten hers, Rose immediately handed me a tambourine. Over the course of the hour that tambourine got a lot of play, and I can now list "percussionist" on my curriculum vitae.

Rose, an amazing teacher, packed more into that hour than one would believe possible: finger exercises, several songs, fascinating tidbits of musical history, ukulele terminology, very effective tips and techniques, and a great deal of humor and fun. "Do what you can but above all, have a good time," she instructed the group.

Prior to the class she introduced me to Ed Daniel, one of the members who had arrived early and whom she described as "a wonderful player. When Ed does 'Love Me Tender,' women throw their panties at him!"

Daniel, who was in the original group of 15, joined up when he saw the class first offered in the senior center's bulletin. Although he has been in California for over 50 years, he grew up in Hawaii where "when you start walking you're already carrying a ukulele." He played in a community band, entertaining patients and workers in Molokai, "but I don't have leprosy - I'm cured!"

After class three of the members shared their impressions.

Wena Dows, who has been attending for almost two years, joined because of an over 100-year-old ukulele that had belonged to her mother. "It had been sitting around for years and I had never played it," she said. She considers Rose "a wonderful gal, a teacher who is challenging and complimenting and keeps us learning new things while reviewing what we've learned. Playing in a group provides me with confidence, and when I'm with the group it's inspiring. I come from a musical family and this gives me a special connection to my mother."

“When people come here, it’s pure enjoyment,” Lillian Jenkins emphasized. “You don’t talk about another thing, what problems you may have, or if your husband is sick. If I were to describe this experience, I’d call it joyous indulgence. Some things are selfish indulgences, but this is joyous.”

Ray Sczesniak is looking forward to playing in the Ukulele Holiday Show Spectacular at the senior center on December 19. It will be open to the public and will feature The CC Strummers. “This keeps us going, keeps our heads thinking and is lots of fun,” Sczesniak said. “It’s not like family – it IS family.”

Rose quoted a comment a student had made: “I don’t play good but I play fun,” adding that she “will take some credit for creating a positive space, but ukulele is more about sharing than rivalry. It’s not about me, it’s about us. The music has also created a therapeutic and healing space for people to work through the inevitable losses (and gains) in our lives.”

She stressed her good fortune in having had excellent music teachers, “but really, the lessons I learned from them had more to do with how to live with joy and gratitude in concert with our limitations than about doing a C scale, and I try to bring that attitude to our classes. Yes, we want to play the ukulele and make sweet music, but above all, I want all of us to feel joy and the connection we have with each other. I have watched a room full of strangers grow into a family and that is the most rewarding thing of all. Of course, it does help that the ukulele attracts a certain kind of person and when someone shows up who is a little off-putting in one way or another, the gruff exterior either begins to melt away or they never come back. It’s a real laboratory to observe human nature and behold how both music and a sense of community give us a second wind, and, maybe, even heal us too.”

Although The CC Strummers is a senior group, Rose noted that ukulele has undergone a global revolution and is enjoying great appeal that crosses generations, citing Jake Shimabukuro, who is in his 30s, as a popular virtuoso who employs fast, complex finger work. “There’s been a perfect storm, with a spate of books that are user-friendly, many videos on YouTube, and teachers bringing ukes into nursery schools and kindergarten,” she explained. “It’s such a welcoming, inclusive instrument, very forgiving and with a large margin for error. It doesn’t leave any age group out.”

She recommended a feature documentary that she thinks might be available through Netflix. It’s called “Mighty Uke” and shows why so many people are turning to this instrument to express themselves and make a special connection with the past and each other. And she’s giving some thought to a possible future project that would involve assembling people of all ages into a ukulele group.

Perhaps not coincidentally, her background includes earning a degree in psychology, employment in an ER and attendance at a nursing school, all activities that have a strong healing connotation. And the ukulele is powerful medicine when it comes to elevating one’s mood without any negative side effects. “It’s great when you have a chance to use all your gifts and live in Technicolor,” she said.

When it comes to being a real crowd-pleaser, community builder and purveyor of joy and healing, Rose knows exactly which strings to pull. They number four and are conveniently located in plain sight, right there on the front of her cherished ukulele.

For further information she can be reached at (310) 285-3506 and by emailing info@calirose.com.


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Found in section: [arts](#)

Reader Feedback


9 Responses to “Ukulele Lady Cali Rose – Sandra Coopersmith”

1.  *Linde Carlson* says:
[September 23, 2013 at 6:48 pm](#)


Absolutely charming!

2.  *Cali Rose* says:
[September 24, 2013 at 8:55 am](#)

Thank you Sandra for this comprehensive article about how the ukulele is bringing joy to our neighborhood right here in Culver City and beyond. A ukulele revolution is happening in the world and with your “shout out” I hope more and more people discover this marvelous instrument.


3.  *Dennis Brando* says:
[September 25, 2013 at 8:35 am](#)

Cali’s warmth and Aloha Spirit reaches from Coast to Coast.


4.  *Alice Fowlie* says:
[September 25, 2013 at 3:42 pm](#)

What a great article about you Cali. I've been a fan of yours for several years now. I first met you when you played at a concert at Island Bazaar. Then met you at one of the Ukulele Festivals in Cerritos 4 or 5 years ago. You and Craig played under a tree. You were generous enough to come to watch one of Shirley Orlando's groups play on stage. I was one of those players. I've followed your blog ever since then and followed your establishment of the Culver City Strummers. I may see you again in Huntington Beach when you and Craig work at the Ukulele Festival planned by Shirley Orlando. You are so talented as both an entertainer and teacher and your enthusiasm is contagious. Keep doing what you do so well.


With love from Alice Fowlie the guide of String Thing at Island Bazaar.p

5.  *Thomas Kuwata* says:
[September 25, 2013 at 7:46 pm](#)

Thanks for the beautiful article about Cali. We are so fortunate to have her as our teacher at CC Strummers !!

6.  *Karin* says:
[September 26, 2013 at 4:36 pm](#)


What an endearing story about a real cool human being; Cali ! She makes playing the Ukulele sound like great fun. She is following her bliss and spreading joy just by sharing her passion. Great article, Sandra!

7.  *Betty Bryant* says:
[September 27, 2013 at 12:35 pm](#)

What a wonderful article! Thank you for presenting the real and total and amazing Cali Rose. I am proud to be her friend and student.

8.  *Craig Brandau* says:
[September 27, 2013 at 2:44 pm](#)

To say that I'm proud of my wife and the work she does is a true understatement!

9.  *lurayn* says:
[October 8, 2013 at 8:57 am](#)

Sandra is the best!!!! Her writing makes any subject come alive and jump right off the page. Reading her articles brightens up the VERY quiet county I live in... here in Florida. I met Sandra many, oh so many, years ago through our jobs. She delights me still by giving me the directions to access this newspaper. You are so-o-o lucky to have her and someone was so-o-o smart to hire her.