

Global Gaithersburg

Keith and Nani Lowery's ukulele festival survives and thrives

BY JIM D'VILLE

Honolulu native Nani Lowery's mother handed her a ukulele at age five, and in the Hawaiian tradition, Nani learned to play the instrument by ear. But it wasn't until some three decades later, in the late 1990s, while living in Maryland, that she attended her first ukulele festival: the Strathmore, in Bethesda. "I took a workshop with Ginger Johnson and Robyn Kneubuhl, which opened my ears to music theory, up-the-neck chords, and understanding what I was playing. It also made me a much better ukulele instructor."

Encouraged by his parents, Nani's husband, Keith Lowery, started his musical journey in the third grade with a guitar. "I always enjoyed music and was writing spiritual-based songs by the time I was in high school," he says. When Nani became a member of the church Keith was attending in the mid-1980s, he met his ukulele-playing future wife.

The couple caught the ukulele festival bug in 2018, when Nani was asked to teach a workshop at the Funky Frets Ukulele Festival in Boyertown, Pennsylvania. Nani says, "They put us up in a beautiful bed and breakfast, the Twin Turrets." Keith adds, "We were sitting around the table with the other artists, and I was between Del Rey and Uncle Zac. I was so fascinated talking with people that made money playing and teaching ukulele, I don't even remember eating breakfast."

On the drive back to their home in Maryland, Keith broached the idea of starting their own ukulele festival. "We knew about the Strathmore festival, but we thought Maryland was big enough to have two ukulele festivals." Thus, the Gaithersburg Ukulele Festival was born; less than a month after that Funky Frets Festival, Nani and Keith had created a website for their new festival and began selling tickets for the March 2019 event.

Ukulele master Stu Fuchs headlined the first Gaithersburg festival and, according to Keith, provided invaluable help in stewarding the pair in their new role as festival promoters. First and foremost, though, Keith, who has a master's degree in adult education, wanted to create a festival environment where people came to learn from the best players and teachers.

After that successful first festival, plans for the second in March 2020 continued until the pandemic put the kibosh on live, in-person events for the next two years. Keith says, "I cried. We were devastated. But we also felt so bad for all the artists. Our son, Luke, said something very profound at the time: 'The only thing harder than putting together a festival is dismantling one.'"

Down but not out, Nani and Keith wasted no time figuring out how to help many of the ukulele artists who were suddenly out of work. Nani explains, "We saw all these people jumping on Zoom and Facebook Live, and we thought this was a way to help people support all these musicians." By April 2020, they had launched a series of online workshops and mini-festivals that employed a multitude of artists who taught thousands of ukulele enthusiasts over the next 14 months.

Each of the online fests featured a two-hour exhibition of ukulele talent called the Performer's Showcase augmented by a variety of ukulele workshops, all held over Zoom. That multi-part spring 2020 festival included 11 showcases and 25 one-hour workshops, featuring a variety of top names, including Daniel Ward & Heidi



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Swedberg, Jack and the Vox, Neal Chin, Bryan Tolentino, Abe Lagrimas, Jr., Arden Fujiwara, Christopher Davis-Shannon, Andrew & Jay Molina, Cathy Fink & Marcy Marxer, Aaron & Nicole Keim, Brittini Paiva, Petey Mack, and more. Nani and Keith also made sure to include many international artists, including Francesco Albertazzi (Italy), Paul Mansell (England), Mike Haysom (Scotland), Elisabeth Pfeiffer (Germany), Andy Eastwood (England), and Vinícius Vivas (Brazil).

After a summer break, the Lowerys organized a whopping *four-month* online ukulele festival series. This time the event included 15 Performer Showcases and 59 ukulele workshops held between September and December 2020. The festival also had theme weeks covering many different styles of music, including '70s/'80 Hits, Elvis/Blues Week, Music from Musicals & Movies, and Hawaiian.

Maureen Andary, Vinicius Vivas, and Gracie Terzian performed at the 2022 Gaithersburg festival

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The couple continued their Zoom events into 2021 with the Icy-Spicy Ukulele Festival. And with the change of seasons came the Spring Fling Ukulele Festival. All told, Nani and Keith's Gaithersburg Ukulele Festival hosted an amazing 158 workshops and 41 Performer Showcases over 14 months.

The opportunity to play and teach to a worldwide audience during the pandemic without leaving home was what many of the performers say was the most crucial aspect of the events the Lowerys organized. However, as interest in online events started to wane, and both musicians and fans began to feel more confident about the safety of live events, the duo decided to resurrect the in-person Gaithersburg Ukulele Festival in March 2022. Keith says, "When I put out the notice that we would have a live festival, over 30 artists from our online workshops

asked to be invited. I wanted to hire as many of those people as possible." The 2022 live festival ended up including an unprecedented 24 performing artists. Kelly Thompson, co-owner of Funky Frets in Boyertown, says, "The ukulele world is very regional. Many casual players have never even heard of ukulele greats like Lil' Rev or James Hill. The unique thing about the Gaithersburg festival is Nani and Keith cram so much music into their event and expose people to the global nature of the ukulele world."

Adds Nashville musician Bob Tigert, "There are two kinds of ukulele festivals. One is where the attendees come together to learn songs, jam, and have fun. Although those things happen at the Gaithersburg festival, Nani and Keith focus more on presenting the diversity of musicianship found

in the ukulele world. It came to be that way because they set a precedent with their online festivals, which included artists from around the globe whom many people hadn't seen or heard."

For many months now, preparations for the 2023 Gaithersburg Ukulele Festival have been in full swing. This time, according to Keith, nearly 20 artists will be on the bill, with about half returning and the other half new to the festival.

Once again it will include several top non-U.S. players, including Peter Moss (England), Vinicius Vivas, Aline Kelly (Brazil), Giovanni Albini (Italy), Calico (Austria); plus a boatload of top-notch American performers. The festival will be held Thursday through Saturday, March 16–18, 2023, at the Pathways Baptist Church in Gaithersburg, Maryland. gaithersburgukefest.com

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