



LOTS OF LOVE IN LANSING

It's Ukulele Central in the 'Great Uke State'

BY HEIDI SWEDBERG

Ask a Michigander, “Where do you live?” Up pops the mitten. Those who hail from Lansing point to the center of their lifeline and say, “right here.” In 1847, the hamlet of 20 souls was named Michigan’s capital solely for its location, smack in the middle of the state. It is a “Little Town that Could,” and the people of Lansing know how to do a lot with something little.

Once renowned as the home of Oldsmobile, this modest Mid-Michigan burg has a new claim to fame—according to Guinness World Records, it’s also home of the Largest Ukulele. Every spring, when Lansing celebrates the weeklong Mighty Uke Day (MUD), master carpenter Larry Stump, the big uke’s maker, takes the oxymoronic axe on tour of Old Town Lansing in the bed of his baby blue 1959 Chevy Apache pickup truck. Like the Pied Piper’s flute, it draws ukulele players out of the woodwork.

Being invited to play and teach at a festival is an honor, a thrill, and a heck of a lot

of work. Getting to know a community focused on the joy of ukulele is the best perk of the job. MUD7 wrapped up in May 2017, and **Daniel Ward** and I enjoyed chamber-of-commerce weather and total immersion in a large community of Lansing’s ukulele enthusiasts.

UKULELE AMBASSADOR

Michigan’s Ukulele Ambassador and MUD organizer **Ben Hassenger** picks us up at the airport. It’s easy to spot his car—the one with the GCEA license plate and the rough muffler. The wear and tear of organizing and a waning croup have taken a toll on Ben’s voice, which has a husky crackle. As we drive around Old Town, Ben points out the various MUD venue locations while reminiscing about his relationship with the ukulele. One chance encounter with a ukulele festival in Hawaii changed Ben’s life. What began as a casual flirtation became a serious affair, driving a wedge between him

and his former life partner, the guitar. (Although they still have a cordial relationship.) Eight years later, Ben and the uke are officially a happy couple.

The Lansing Area Ukulele Group (LAUGH) named Ben “Michigan’s Ukulele Ambassador,” presenting him with an official embroidered sash. “LAUGH was the incubator,” he says of the group he co-founded. As the strum clique grew, ukulele clubs and events began popping up all over the “Great Uke State.” Ben has hardly a breather between the activities he organizes. Midwest Uke Camp is on the heels of MUD, followed by Uketoberfest, Mini-Uke Day, and Yooper Uke Fest. In addition, he teaches classes through Music Is the Foundation, the 501(c)(3) organization he created to support music education in his community.

“There’s Sir Pizza,” he says, pointing out a red brick building with neon signs advertising brands of beer on tap. “It’s LAUGH’s home base, and where the MUD open-mic will take place. You’ll be teaching here at the Quaker Friends Meeting house, and the

UKE SCENE

Ambassador
Ben Hassenger,
with Jack



Sunday concert will be at the MICA gallery, right across the street from Urban Beat, where the featured artist concerts will take place.” All this, in the space of one short block.

We park beside the Old Town General Store, which sells all things local, from dandy Michigan candy to quicker Lansing liquor. (Well, not liquor per se, just Michigan Beer, hard cider, and wines of the world.) Ben is proud of his town. He points out the city’s banners, featuring a vintage print of a wasp-waisted ukulele-playing woman, before we duck into the store to pick up mitten-imprinted souvenirs, Michigan beer, and some fresh treats to fortify ourselves. Storeowner Rhea Van Atta takes us out back to view the spring blooms in the immaculately tended back courtyard, where **Danielle Ate the Sandwich**, **Victoria Vox**, and Anne Janelle (with **James Hill**), have played summer acoustic concerts. Then it’s off for a pilgrimage to Elderly Instruments, where we will be teaching classes the next day.

MIDDLE MAN

The man in the middle of the ukulele scene would be **Stan Werbin**, and his shop Elderly Instruments is ukulele ground zero. Stan attends every MUD concert, sitting in the front row, rapt. Looking into his smiling eyes, you know he is a true lover of music and musicians. Over the years, Elderly Instruments has employed a who’s who of

Lansing players, some for more than 20 years—uke greats **Gerald Ross** and **Brian Hefferan** among them.

Stan’s love affair with the ukulele began in 1978, a few years after Elderly first opened its doors. “At that time you couldn’t give a ukulele away! My first uke was a Martin Style 3, which I bought for 25 bucks.” His inspiration was his bandmate in the Lost World Stringband, bass master Frank Youngman, who played the heck out of a ukulele. Since taking up the ukulele, Stan has been a champion of the people’s instrument, co-founding LAUGH with Ben (another former employee) and Dave Passant, and supporting educational programs and ukulele events all over the state.

Elderly employee and soprano ukuleloving multi-instrumentalist **Andy Wilson** gives us a tour of the historic 3,500 square foot building in Old Town Lansing. The showrooms are jam-packed with instruments, and you are welcome to take your pick and play at leisure. There are nearly 300 new and used ukuleles in their stock, ranging in price from \$40 to \$4,000, including prototypes for the new signature models they are collaborating on with Farida Guitars.

Heading downstairs to the adjoining building, we pass the enormous repair shop with more luthier’s benches than I can count. Students carrying esoteric instrument cases disappear into cavernous classrooms farther below. At my behest,

Andy flies me through the string vault. A few years back I hosted a “String Thing.” We strung 24 Ohana SK-10s with unique string sets, to experience the full effect of how strings influence the sound of identical instruments. I ordered my strings from Elderly, as they had a mind-blowing selection, and now I want to see where they have come from. Rough-hewn wooden shelves filled with little square envelopes of strings for every imaginable type of instrument seem to go on forever in the fluorescent-lit warren. They carry roughly 200 unique sets of ukulele strings alone. The selection of guitar strings must outnumber them exponentially. Watching Andy locate a specific set of strings is like witnessing a master librarian effortlessly pull a title from the stacks.

WOMEN (AND MEN) OF THE GREAT UKE STATE

MUD7 boasts two concerts in the beautiful Dart Auditorium on the campus of Lansing Community College. The first night features local females (and a few men backing them up). It is rare to see so many women onstage, and given the predominance of women attending classes and ukulele groups, puzzling. A commitment to tipping the balance makes for an amazing night of music. Brilliant young performer **Olivia Millerschin** starts the show with her poignant original songs, and **Marlowe Teichman** dazzles with shredding instrumentals. Juliana Wilson, accompanied by her husband Andy Wilson on harmonica and cornet, makes you wish for more. (The next day, Julianna and Andy, along with his twin brother Joe and his wife, perform with their parents as The Wilson Family Ukulele Obsession!) Headliner **Rachael Davis**, with her husband/bass player Dominic John Davis, raises her angel’s voice and takes my breath away. So many talented ukulele women from Michigan, so much great music.

The following night’s concert opens with another amazing Lansing woman, **Melissa Sigh** of Sigh Studios, leading her young



AWESOME SHARI

One of Lansing's most awesome ukulele ladies is the gal known as Awesome Shari. **Shari Ballard-Krishnan** is the epitome of what is right with ukulele. With her beaming smile and vivacious style, she is hard to miss. Shari is the welcoming committee, the cheering squad, and the volunteer you always dreamed of. However, there is more to her than meets the eye. The story of how she came to the ukulele is beautiful and deep.

When her son, Nick, was diagnosed with autism, Shari and her husband Rajan found music to be the best conduit for communication between them and Nick. Drumming and percussion

were his passion, but Nick needed a lot of help to be able to participate in school programs. Shari became Nick's advocate, and eventually his paraeducator, accompanying him to music camps and classes to ensure he'd be able to access education and grow as a musician.

In 2014, a traumatic right hand injury forced Shari to stop playing drums and to start looking for a new instrument, something light that she could primarily play with her right hand. The ukulele fit

the bill. She made the leap with passion and commitment:

"Little did I realize that playing the ukulele would soon become one of the best recreational music decisions I have ever made!

"Another great outcome has been watching my husband love this ukulele journey. Shortly after I started playing, he started learning, too! It gave him a fresh new hobby to look forward to, as he faces his retirement this fall from being a physician for over 40 years. As an older couple, we feel like we are constantly going on dates again! Ukulele events are just so much fun."

UKE SCENE

ukulele players in a few great well-arranged and perfectly performed songs. The 20 beautiful kids (with girls outnumbering boys by an 8:2 ratio) are a tough act to follow. Sigh Studios is a fantastic Lansing resource, offering ukulele classes for kids as young as four through continuing adult.

The rest of the evening features gentlemen of the Great Uke State. The Ukulele Kings is Ben's own band, with bass player Steve Szilagyi and lead uke player **Patrick Malloy**. By this point, Ben has entirely lost his voice, so Pat sings lead and the band plays instrumentals from their newly released CD *Three Cool Cats*. The next set features Gerald Ross and Frank Youngman, with special guests Andy and Joe Wilson. The combination of their easy camaraderie, Midwestern modesty, and musical mastery makes the audience feel as if they are watching something as casual as a rehearsal, while experiencing musical magic. At the end of our set, Daniel and I ask everyone to join us for a few numbers. Being surrounded by Lansing's finest is a dream come true.

SHARING THE LOVE

Daniel and I do a final show at Mount Hope STEAM School for kids in grades 4–6. The afterschool ukulele club, led by teacher **Mary**

Hutchins and Ben Hassenger, opens for us, performing two songs. The cafeteria is filled with the drowsy warmth of a spring afternoon, and the natives are restless, but when "The Ukicorns" take the stage, the student body cheers and sings along.

Lansing is lucky to have a generous, active, engaged community of music lovers, and especially lucky to have Ben. Through his foundation, he has started ukulele groups at East Lansing's city-run senior program Prime Time, ESL classes with uke at the A+ English School, and numerous school programs like Mount Hope's, as well as providing Special Education music programs.

When over 300 people turn out to participate in a self-made music event like MUD7, you know they must be onto something. Seeing ukulele players pour into the streets, watching all ages line up for open mics and strum-alongs, take over buses with flash mobs, and fill concert seats and stages with "their own," shows the depth of Michigan's talent, commitment, and support. The uke scene in Lansing brings together generations and communities as it continues to grow, and it welcomes you to join in. Little Lansing makes the most out of something small: they are Mighty in Uke!



LANSING TRIVIA

Hawaiian music great Andy Cummings wrote the song "Waikiki" in 1938 while he was on tour in Lansing: "It was a cold and foggy night in November 1938 and we were walking back to our hotel from the theater. I thought of Waikiki with its rolling surf, warm sunshine, palm trees..."

Daniel and I performed "Waikiki" at MUD7, with Gerald Ross on lap steel guitar and Frank Youngman on bass, about two blocks away from the hotel where Mr. Cummings had stayed.

UKETOWN USA

SHOP

Elderly Instruments

A palace of instruments, with a special fondness for the ukulele
elderly.com

Old Town General Store

Michigan-themed and -made gifts and goodies
oldtown-generalstore.com

EVENTS

Mighty Uke Day 8
May 11–13, 2018
mightyukeday.com

PLAY

LAUGH (Lansing Area Ukulele Group)

Meets the second Saturday of every month
[facebook: lansingukes](https://www.facebook.com/lansingukes)

Sigh Studios

Uke classes for all ages
sigh.studio



Andy Wilson at Elderly Instruments