

# Cutting Up, Rocking Out and Jamming on Ukuleles



Joshua Bright for The New York Times

The Ukulele Orchestra of Great Britain, which includes, from left, Dave Suich, Peter Brooke Turner, Hester Goodman, George Hinchliffe, Richie Williams, Will Grove-White and Jonty Bankes, performed songs by David Bowie and others at Zankel Hall on Tuesday.

By ALLAN KOZINN

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The most revelatory moment in the [Ukulele Orchestra of Great Britain's](#) concert at Zankel Hall on Tuesday evening probably came during its performance of "Psycho Killer," the [Talking Heads](#) song, when you realized that David Byrne had missed the boat by not recording the tune with an ensemble of singing ukulele players. Or maybe it was during the group's gracefully sung, delicately plucked account of [David Bowie's](#) "Life on Mars," an idiosyncratic reading of an offbeat selection, even before it morphed into a handful of songs from entirely different universes: among them [Stevie Wonder's](#) "For Once in My Life," the theme song from "Born Free" and [the Who's](#) "Substitute."

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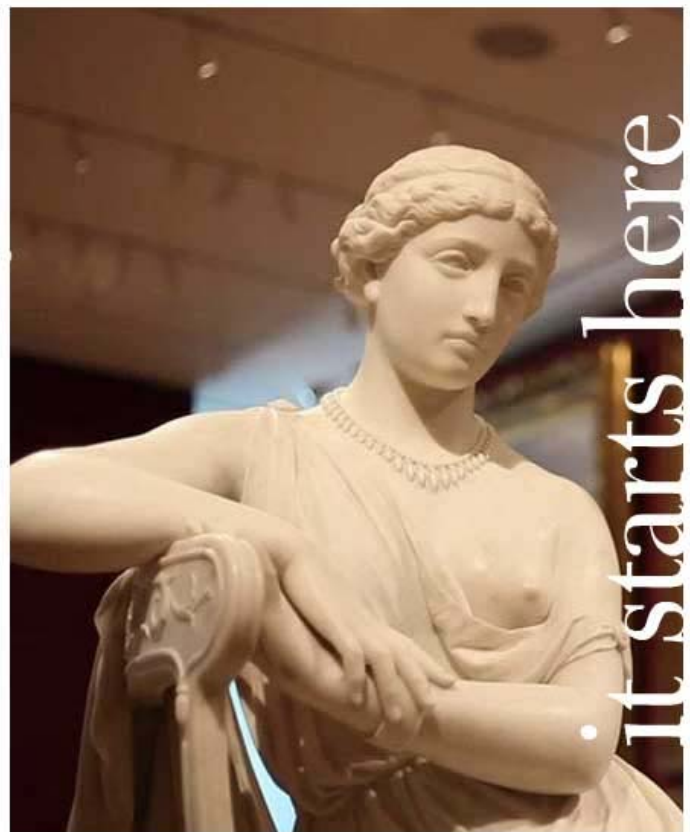
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Come to think of it, another Who song, "Pinball Wizard" — a natural for a ukulele ensemble, you might think, given the rapidly strummed introduction on the Who's recording — yielded a greater surprise. Instead of playing the introduction, or any instrumental accompaniment, ensemble members put down their ukuleles and sang a richly harmonized a cappella backing to George Hinchliffe's vaudevillian lead vocal.

Now in its 25th year, [Ukulele Orchestra of Great Britain](#) is really only an octet, and on Tuesday it was smaller still: with one player ill, the group performed as a septet. It was none the worse for that. Its musicians play



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Joshua Bright for The New York Times  
A head-banging Dave Suich of the Ukulele Orchestra of Great Britain.

ukuleles of different sizes and pitches, from soprano to bass, though Jonty Bankes's electric bass ukulele looks a lot like a conventional bass guitar with a vaguely ukulelelike shape.

Physical comedy (at one point five players crowded together to play one uke), pun-filled banter between songs and stacks of fleeting musical allusions within each piece keep the orchestra's show lively. Amid the gags — there are lots of yuks in ukes apparently — the band offered some finely nuanced playing, with beautifully shaped single-string solos by Mr. Hinchliffe and David Suich.

Perhaps because the ukulele has long been treated as a four-string mini-guitar for amateurs, only a handful of ukulelists have achieved much renown, most notably George Formby in Britain and [Tiny Tim](#) in the United States. But the instrument has a dedicated constituency. [George Harrison](#) was a devoted ukulelist: he periodically turned up, uke in hand, at meetings of the [George Formby Society](#), and he is seen strumming the instrument in "[The Beatles Anthology](#)." Younger musicians have taken to it as well. [Julia Nunes](#), a 21-year-old player from upstate New York, has a huge following on YouTube, where her inventive version of the Foundations' "[Build Me Up Buttercup](#)" has had nearly two million plays.

These British comedian harmonists are drawn mostly to rock oldies: their program included antiquities like Steppenwolf's "Born to Be Wild" and the [Sex Pistols](#)' "Anarchy in the U.K." — which they performed as a cheerful campfire song, complete with swaying — and comparatively recent songs like Wheatus's "Teenage Dirtbag" and [Nirvana](#)'s "Smells Like Teen Spirit." Lyrics were occasionally tweaked: in a version of [Isaac Hayes](#)'s soul classic "Shaft" the line "What's the most important part of a coal mine, apart from coal" was added just before the refrain.

The set also touched on jazz, blues and comic spins on a few classical pieces, including a whistled version of the Badinerie from Bach's B minor Orchestral Suite, all cleverly arranged and played with humor, energy and virtuosity.

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