

KALA
BRAND MUSIC

EST. 2001

MIKE UPTON OF KALA

Mike Upton is the founder of Kala Brand Music Company in northern California. Established in 2005, Kala builds 120-plus models of ukulele, including travel and bass variations.

INTERVIEWED BY MICHAEL GALLANT

HOW DO YOU START YOUR DAY?

I crack open the Bible and read Proverbs. I get a lot of business wisdom out of that book. "A soft answer turns away wrath" — there's one. Then I grab my two VPs, we pray, and then we launch into our day, which usually involves a lot of coffee.

WHERE DID THE NAME KALA COME FROM?

Kala means several things in Hawaiian. It's the name of a unicorn fish, and slang for money, but it also has a historical component to it. Tribes of the various islands would fight, but when they came to a truce, they would have something called the kala where they would forgive each other, make peace and move on. I liked the diversity of meanings, and the idea of coming together in peace.

HOW DOES THE NAME ALIGN WITH YOUR BUSINESS PHILOSOPHY?

There's this duality when you're in business. You want to make money, but it's balanced with wanting to live a peaceful life with yourself, God, and your customers and vendors. We love our customers. If the people who end up with our instruments are happy, that's the best marketing we can do. That goes for the stores that we sell through as well. They're our customers as much as the end user.

YOUR FATHER INTRODUCED YOU TO THE UKULELE.

He's in his 80s, and he still plays. He formed a ukulele club at his retirement center. He played a lot of music when I was young, guitar and harmonica, but he pulled out the ukulele especially, so the instrument was always around.

ARE YOU OF HAWAIIAN DESCENT?

I am not. My family is from England. But I did live in Hawaii from 1989 to 1994 and I have family there, so there was certainly a connection before I started the company.

YOU PRONOUNCE THE NAME OF THE INSTRUMENT DIFFERENTLY THAN I'VE HEARD BEFORE.

That's the Hawaiian pronunciation. Ooh-ku-LE-le, without the YU.

WHY DID YOU WANT TO START AN UKULELE COMPANY?

I started working for Hohner in 1995 and had migrated from the warehouse into sales in Hawaii. In 1998, we started developing a line of ukuleles, and that's where I really got interested in the instrument. When they relocated in 2005, I chose not to go with them. I started Kala. I was already in that business and wanted to do it for myself and use my own ideas. I saw an opportunity, even back in the early 2000s. There weren't that many people interested then — just enough to see the beginning of a real trend.

IS THE UKULELE COOL?

It's not cool, but the fact that it's not cool is cool. You see it everywhere because it's so easy to play, portable, fairly inexpensive, and so much fun. It's easy to get a group of people playing together around the ukulele and there seems to be a community aspect around it. It's an inclusive instrument.

DO YOU SEE THE TREND CONTINUING?

Yes, and I think we'll see some evolution, like with the resurgence of acoustic guitar in the '90s. Because of the sheer numbers of people playing, there will be new products coming out — maybe more interest in steel-stringed ukes, different tunings, maybe different body shapes. Ukuleles will be around because so many people have come into music through them and consider themselves ukulele players. It has essentially created another category of stringed instrument.

WHAT MOTIVATED YOU TO MAKE THE U-BASS?

That happened by chance. Owen Holt came up with the concept. I met him in 2007, and he had his ukulele bass, which was the predecessor of the U-BASS. I tried it and flipped out, because I play bass myself. I was excited. Owen wanted to work with someone who could build the instruments a little less expensively and get them introduced into a great market, so that's how we began.

"The uke has created another category of stringed instrument."

WAS IT WELL-RECEIVED?

Over the next several years, it got some notoriety because it got into the hands of great players like Abraham Laboriel. Hector Maldonado from Train started playing one on stage. Jim Mayer from Jimmy Buffet's band plays one quite a bit. Then it started getting into recording studios and just took off. That's been a big part of our success in the last three to four years.

CAN YOU QUANTIFY?

We hit about \$14.8 million in sales last year between ukuleles and the U-BASS. Unit-wise, I think we approached 300,000 sold. This year in particular is interesting, because a lot of people have jumped on the bandwagon. Almost every stringed instrument company now offers ukuleles and new companies are starting to offer the instruments as well. It's gotten a bit more competitive, but we have a strong brand and that lends itself to solid business.

IF NOT THE MUSIC INDUSTRY, WHAT WOULD YOU BE DOING?

I've been in the music industry my whole life, starting with playing bass in bands. If not that, I'd probably just be out in the garden. I love growing stuff. MI