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Kamaka Ukulele Factory Hits All the Right Notes

by Yvonne Michie Horn

Sam Kamaka is showing me the original pineapple ukulele. It's oval, not the usual nipped-in-at-the-waist model. His father, Samuel K. Kamaka, designed this one around 1916, he tells me, and when it was finished, a neighbor exclaimed, "It looks like a pineapple!" With that, she took it home and painted its box with thumb-size yellow and green ovals.

Sam turns the pegs on the "pineapple" to tune the strings to "My Dog Has Fleas." I ask for a song, mentally settling back for a rendition of "Aloha Oe." Instead, "Little Brown Jug" comes as a bit of a jolt.

We are leaning against a smudged display case, because there is simply no place to sit in the cluttered Kamaka Ukulele factory in Honolulu. What is not covered with stacks of dusty files and record books is covered with ukuleles or bits and pieces of ukuleles.

Kamaka Ukulele has been making the instruments for more than 90 years, Sam and his bother Fred following in their father's footsteps. Fred, immaculate in a well-pressed aloha shirt, takes care of the "numbers." Sam oversees production. "I'm the one covered with sawdust," he says, taking a swipe at his blue jeans. Both Fred's and Sam's children are also involved in the business.

After several moves over the years, Kamaka Ukulele has headquartered since 1959 in a two-story concrete-block structure at 550 South St. Once painted blue and now rapidly flaking to its beige undercoat, it sits in the shadows of sleek offices. A casual motorist driving by would think it closed.

That's far from true. Inside, the golden age of the ukulele continues with the handcrafted manufacture of thousands of instruments a year, ranging in price from \$100 student ukuleles to near \$2,000. In addition, there are custom orders to fill. Sam picks up a just-completed model with a giraffe-like neck ordered by a banjo player. What is it called? Sam studies it quizzically. "A banjlele, I guess. If they want to pay, we don't mind."

Most Kamaka ukuleles remain in the Hawaiian heartland, with only 3 or 4 percent sent to music stores out of state. Ukulele is a required subject in some of Hawaii's elementary schools, taught by kapuna, older folk well versed in Hawaiiana. Kamaka supplies more than 1,000 child-size ukuleles to the program every year.

Added to the orders is a parade of repairs - dropped or sat-upon ukes, as well as old and precious but neglected instruments.

The material of choice is koa, indigenous to Hawaii, hard as mahogany, beautifully straight grained and increasingly difficult to come by because of stringent harvesting restrictions. The koa comes from the sawmill cut in pieces the size of railroad ties. The wood is warm brown when it arrives at the factory, where it ages outdoors for four years until, "like senior citizens," as Sam puts it, the lumber turns gray.

Inside, 18 people work at their stations, each a perfectionist at a step in the creation of a perfect ukulele. "There's not a lot of turnover," Sam says. "One has been here since 1972."

Sam and I shuffle through wood curls and sawdust back to the front of the shop, where he again picks up his father's pineapple. He gives the strings a strum and twists the pegs to "My Dog Has Fleas." Once again, "Aloha Oe" comes to mind. But Sam swings into "You are my sunshine, my only sunshine. You make me happy ..."