

Strummin' and a hummin' with the ukelele club



Love me, love my uke: Kevin O'Toole started the Warrnambool Ukelele Group with his partner, Annie Carmichael (at left – teaching beginners), in 2012: it now has more than 100 members.

[dropcap style="font-size: 60px; color:#A02F2F"] I [/dropcap]t may look like a guitar that never grew up, but the plucky little ukulele has been enjoying a global surge in popularity that has reached all the way to South-West Victoria.

In fact the Warrnambool Ukulele Group (WUG) has proven so popular since it started with just eight people in 2012 that it now has about 120 members...and a waiting list.

Partners **Annie Carmichael** and **Kevin O'Toole** started the

Warrnambool group after living in Hobart for a time, where Annie learned the ukulele with the Hobart Ukulele Group that operated under the gorgeous acronym, HUG.

“You can do a lot of things with a ukulele,” says Kevin, who is also an accomplished guitar player.

“It is easy to learn, easy for beginners and you can then take it as far as you want to go: we have people who play everything from Bach to jazz to rock and roll,” he explains.



WUG members Victor Reid with his deep-voiced bass ukelele and Graeme Bell (left) with his eye on the chords.

[dropcap style="font-size: 60px; color:#A02F2F"] W
[/dropcap]ith just four strings, the ukelele has a simple chord system compared to a guitar and, much like a harmonica, is the ultimate in portability at a cheap price.

Beginner ukeleles start at around \$75, but a seriously good quality ukelele can cost up to \$2000. They also come in three

varieties – soprano, concert and tenor – plus the less common bass ukelele, like that played so beautifully by WUG member **Victor Reid**.

The WUG members, however, are less concerned about fancy ukeleles than simply having a good time: no matter how well each person might play or sing.

Both beginners and seasoned players meet every Monday night at the Royal Hotel, on the corner of Timor and Fairy streets, where publican **John Bonney** has kindly let them take over a back room attached to the dining area.



It's sitting room only at the Royal Hotel when WUG members like Ian Brown break out their ukeleles for a night of singing and playing.

[dropcap style="font-size: 60px; color:#A02F2F"] T
[/dropcap]he night starts with a half-hour lesson for beginners, followed by a 90-minute session of music and

singing from the official WUG songbook, including any specific requests from members.

It is at this point that anyone who happens to be eating in the Royal Hotel bistro is in for a treat. As they tuck into their counter meals, the back room erupts into a fusion of Irish-style pub singing, country-and-western ballads, foot-stomping, whistling and ukelele-playing fun.

The mood is infectious and almost enough to make even the most tone-deaf punter want to race out to buy a ukelele.

"It is all about having a good time, first and foremost, but if people are prepared to practice, they will also get better," Kevin says.

"We have a lot of members who have never played a musical instrument in their life, but, as a group, we are also getting better and better."

Like other ukelele groups around Australia, WUG doesn't take itself too seriously during its occasional public performances (that included the Koroit Irish Festival at the weekend) and members dress up in a fancy dress theme for each "concert".

"If nothing else, we are dressed very brightly, we are making a lot of noise and we are having a good time," Kevin says with a laugh.

"At the end of the day, if you have got a ukelele in your hand and your not smiling, then your not playing a ukelele."



WUG is a mixture of men and women players, with Anne Rea and Jan McCluggage among those enjoying the weekly jam session.

[box] You can find the Warrnambool Ukelele Group [website here](#). Interested people are encouraged to put their names on the waiting list, as openings do come up relatively regularly. You can hear WUG in action each Monday night from 7pm at the Royal Hotel, Timor/Fairy streets, Warrnambool. [/box]



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