

Talk Story

AARON KEIM

AERICAN singer/songwriter Aaron Keim and his wife Nicole have released four albums and several handmade music books. As well as performing and teaching ukulele under the stage name 'The Quiet American', Keim is also a talented luthier who builds instruments for Mya-Moe.

You're a multi-instrumentalist, but you're best known for playing uke. What do you like about it?

I like the simplicity of the ukulele. It's difficult to hide behind because of its modest sound (and size). It's just you, the song and four strings to make your musical statement. Despite that simplicity, it seems to take a lifetime to master it!

How would you describe your music?

I specialise in old-time American folk music: ballads, blues, fiddle tunes, gospel, etc. Most of the traditional music I play is from the southeast part of the US before 1940 or so. The original music I write with my wife Nicole is in the same tradition.

Where do you find inspiration for your original songs and tunes?

I listen to lots of old music, but lots of new music as well. New music inspires me to be creative and original within the context of the traditional styles. Modern singer/songwriters, indie rock bands and other neo-traditionalists are a big resource to pull from. Most of the old-timey stuff I like can be found in the endless online world. It allows me to hear and see my heroes from the past as if they were alive today. The old singers and pickers keep me grounded in the musical language and tradition that I love.

What is it that makes you and Nicole such a good team?

Nicole is a fantastic singer and a sensitive musician. Since we live together, she

hears me practice all the songs until I master them. She can just jump in on the harmony vocals or chord along on the uke because she's heard it so much already! Also, her skills as an artist are very helpful in writing our books, tabs and workshop materials so people can easily read them and appreciate their beauty. I spent years touring without her and we hated being apart. Now we get to travel together and make the music we love every night on the road!

You recorded your first album on wax cylinder. How difficult was that?

It was the easiest recording I have ever made! I sat down in front of the big sound horn and played six songs in one take each. As I sang, the stylus cut the grooves in the wax cylinders. It took less than an hour to do the whole thing. It was a pretty authentic experience in line with what recording was like before electricity was involved. I encourage people to check out the CD (*The Quiet American, Vol. 1*) only if they like really scratchy and old-sounding stuff. I love it!

You attended the 2012 Cairns Ukulele Festival. What were your impressions of the Australian uke scene?

We were impressed with the uke scene in Cairns. Everyone was very nice and welcoming and the people were hungry

to learn from us in the workshops. The average uke player already had a good foundation to learn from and people really understood our performances. I hope we can go back soon.

What's the best piece of advice you could give an intermediate uker who wants to take his/her playing to the next level?

Pick one style or technique and really dig into it. Most people learn a little bit of everything but never really develop because they don't take the time to get really good at it. Buying more books and CDs won't make you good on their own; you have to practice! I recommend you find other people who like the same stuff and get together to jam and inspire each other.

You recently released a book on clawhammer-style ukulele. Tell us about that.

Clawhammer is a style of banjo playing that also works on the uke. It's a great way to play melodies and fiddle tunes because it fills out the sound with a rhythmic pattern to make up for the short sustain of the uke.

I've been teaching clawhammer uke since 2003, but avoided writing a book because I really believed in the power of learning this style by ear and in person. But people were hungry for a good resource, so we printed the book in combination with a series of YouTube videos on the topic. The response has been great and we've also released it as an eBook.

How did you get into building ukes?

I got into luthiery by buying broken instruments and trying to fix them. The first instrument I made was a mandolin from a kit. I started the Beansprout company to build banjo-ukes because I didn't like any of the vintage ones and no-one was making new ones I could afford! I made my first banjo-uke in 2007 or so. I started making traditional ukes in 2008 and signed on with Mya-Moe in 2011.

What do you most enjoy about working at Mya-Moe?

The collaboration between [owners] Gordon and Char and I. We all have really different skill sets that add up to a strong and vibrant organisation. I feel like we are making really great ukes right now, as well as creating a community of dedicated players and customers.

Does being a good player help when you're making instruments?

It helps when I'm tweaking the set-up, fretwork, intonation and playability. I'm picky about that stuff. Also, training and experience as a musician have made my ears sensitive to tonal differences, which makes me very detail oriented about the sound. This is helpful while carving the bracing and voicing the soundboard.

Who's your favourite ukulele player of all time?

James Hill. I first met James in 2005 and have really enjoyed his development as a composer and performer. I'm also proud and happy to have played a small part in turning him onto old-time Americana. We've had some great jams! ☑

5 FAVOURITES

COLOUR: Blue

ANIMAL: Monkey

FOOD: Whisky

CITY: Portland, Oregon

WORD: Whisky

Check out Aaron and Nicole's products at quietamericanmusic.com