

# STRUMMING, LEARNIN

NELVIN C. CEPEDA / THE SAN DIEGO UNION-TRIBUNE



## **Guitars and Ukes in the Classroom uses music as a tool to reach and teach kids of all ages and backgrounds**

BY AUDREY COLEMAN

**W**ith a few bold introductory strums on the uke and an infectious grin, Stanley, a second grader in an elementary school in San Diego, starts singing: “Sun is up, the alarm rings/ I wonder what this day brings/ Don’t worry, be happy.” The lyrics jibe with the rhythm of Bobby McFerrin’s catchy song: “When I wake up every day/ It feels like a whole brand new day!/ Don’t worry, be happy.”

Stanley and his fellow students each wrote their own lyrics to the McFerrin song for a class they were attending via Zoom during the pandemic lockdown. They had learned basic chords and strumming skills between September 2019 and March 2020. Their teacher, Gingerlily Lowe, a novice player

herself, kept one lesson ahead of them. “Honestly, I never thought I would be able to teach the kids to play and write their own songs,” says Lowe. “It really is to the credit of Jess, to her development of this program.”

Since 2000, Guitars in the Classroom (now known as Guitars and Ukes in the Classroom) has trained around 17,000 teachers nationwide to engage kids by integrating academics with singing, strumming, and songwriting. Each year, over 1,500 teachers in 39 states learn how to stimulate learning in this way, and each year over a quarter-million students reap the benefits. GITC programs reach students from preschool through high school and also serves students with identified special needs.

# NG, GROWING



GITC founder Jessica Baron

GITC founder Jessica Baron created a developmental approach that integrates music-making with academic and social-emotional learning. When students can strum well enough to accompany their own singing, they gain confidence and feel more motivated to take on new learning challenges. Playing ukulele or guitar in the classroom has benefits that go beyond specific subject matter. It stimulates cognitive development, improves fine motor skills, and provides new social experiences as they practice and play music in groups.

To play the ukulele, however, students first need to learn to hold it correctly, form basic chord shapes, and use good strumming technique. How many students in a

class have the patience for this? In their first GITC course, trainees learn the quickest way to get kids strumming. Most access courses via interactive video, but teachers who live near GITC headquarters in San Diego can attend live classes. In a session Gingerlily Lowe attended there, Jessica Baron revealed her fast track to strumming. “She teaches us to teach the kids first of all in open tuning,” says Lowe. “It’s the Hawaiian taropatch tuning, which uses fewer fingers. So the students pick up the ukulele and right away they can form a chord.” A more advanced-level class covers transitioning students from open to standard tuning.

All trainees are expected to take the GITC beginner course regardless of their

proficiency on guitar or uke. “Even if they can play a thousand chords,” says Baron, “they don’t know how to teach [the instrument] using a developmental methodology that’s ergonomically designed for children without fine motor skills.”

Acquiring this expertise sounds like tough slogging, but, like many of GITC’s 15 weekly courses, the one for beginners builds in lively discussion, group singing, and songwriting. Additional mini-courses focus on topics such as “Songs of Resistance and Resilience.”

The training program is a product of Baron’s vision, which has roots in her passion for music, love of teaching, and desire to find better ways to promote learning. In addition to her extensive experience as a guitarist and music educator, it draws upon her academic studies in child development and clinical psychology. Since GITC’s founding 20 years ago, her integration model has generated interest among educators at all levels. She has presented it in teacher training programs at UC Berkeley, Harvard, and the other institutions. Among her publications are methodologies for teaching young children to play guitar and ukulele, and books such as *Your Musical Child* that link music with learning.

## ENTER THE UKE

Why did Guitars in the Classroom become Guitars and Ukes in the Classroom? Why did the guitar’s four-stringed cousin join the organization 15 years after GITC’s inception? In the beginning came the guitar. “The guitar was my first love and my teaching instrument,” Baron says, “I didn’t play ukulele until 2015.”

Not to dismiss the founder’s statement, it’s still important to consider the cultural timing. During GITC’s gestation period, the ukulele retained unflattering associations for many—a toy, a thing to play as a novelty, the taint of Tiny Tim. The guitar, on the other hand, was always a “real” instrument. By the time GITC officially started, the four-stringed ugly duckling had become,



### PROUD PARENTS

Three of the instructors profiled in the story offer snapshots of parents who have championed their kids' strumming:

Gingerlily Lowe notes that a number of parents purchased ukEs for their kids so they could practice at home. During the lockdown, some parents unable to make such a purchase could obtain donated ukuleles for their kids from GITC headquarters.

Kathy Byington reports that "the kids learning uke will take their music sheets home and then come back and tell me, 'I taught this song to my mom and dad and my dad took out his guitar and we started singing together.'

And James Clarkston, who teaches older kids, received an email from a parent saying how great it is to see their child "start a hobby that is not social media and is a little more enriching than being on the phone all the time."

well, a swan, enthralling players worldwide and spurring luthiers and manufacturers to design more ukuleles with various shapes and combinations of wood. In a climate more receptive to the uke, Baron decided to make the ukulele her second GITC teaching instrument. There was also a precipitating event.

"I got a phone call 100-percent out of the blue from Dave Cafiero," Baron recalls. A manager at Kala Brand Music, Cafiero told her, "I think the work you're doing is fantastic. What could you do with a lot of ukuleles?"

"How many ukuleles are we talking about?"

"Could you use a thousand?"

Enter the uke. "He gave us a thousand ukuleles a year for three years," she says, "and this allowed us to integrate ukEs into our work."

After 2016, the year GITC inserted the words "and UkEs" into its official name, other manufacturers, such as Ko'aloHa, joined Kala as donors. Baron took up the ukulele with gusto. Increasingly, she sees the newcomer's assets as a teaching tool. "The ukulele is so approachable. It lowers the anxiety level for teachers who have never played an instrument before. For younger kids who need to sit on the floor, it makes them feel more relaxed. They can lay the ukulele in front of themselves and sit crisscrossed or hug it like a puppy." For now, the organization retains its original acronym.

Baron's selection of instruments is based on their appropriateness for different age groups as well as their durability, affordability, and, not least, playability. For the youngest students, GITC provides Makala Watermans or bright, colorful Diamond Head 100s, both made of durable, easily cleaned plastic. She is comfortable giving wooden ukEs to children starting at

age seven. "They are mature enough to control themselves," she says, "and learn to take good care of their instruments."

### UNFORGETTABLE

Kathy Byington's third graders at a school in Thousand Oaks, California, have strummed their ukEs while singing multiplication tables to "Jingle Bells." They've written lyrics that use new vocabulary, making sure their verses fit the rhythm of the original song. They have opportunities to sing and strum these creations for the rest of the class. "When it comes time for a test," she says, "I tell them to just remember the song and they'll have what they need."

Byington accesses easy-to-play songs from the abundant collection on the GITC website. Easy to adapt, they draw on traditional, folk, and popular contemporary genres. As she reflects on experiences teaching through music, one song stands out: "With My Own Two Hands," a song by Ben Harper and Jack Johnson that delivers an empowering message in a catchy tune: "I can change the world/ With my own two hands/ Make it a better place / With my own two hands / Make it a kinder place / With my own two hands. . ."

"The first two days we just sang the song to the recording without ukuleles, Byington says. "The next day we played it on the ukulele using the original words and did that for a couple of days. On the fifth day the kids began writing their own verses."

After two weeks, all the kids had written verses they could sing to their own strumming. As a finishing touch, Byington taught them a simplified picking technique Baron had demonstrated in a workshop. It was time to put it all together. "We sang and strummed the song and then I had them do three measures of picking. Then, in the very last measure, we all strummed. After the final strum it was totally quiet. And then they were like, 'Wow! That was so cool!'"

## SIDE BY SIDE

Jessica Baron created the GITC teaching artist position to give teachers support in their classrooms. Assigned to particular classrooms for 10- to 12-week residencies, teaching artists help teachers implement Baron's integration model. In weekly meetings, they provide input for lesson planning, give teaching demonstrations, and co-teach lessons.

Platinum tufts crown GITC teaching artist James Clarkston's dark, shoulder-length hair, perhaps an echo from years playing rock music on his Fender electric guitar. Some 30 years later, he plays classical and flamenco guitar professionally. Consider the contrast between the evening guitar gigs and the morning visits to continuation high schools in the Los Angeles Unified School District. Most students attending such programs arrive with negative baggage—a history of school failure and discipline problems, troubled family backgrounds, poverty, and issues with the law. As a teaching artist, Clarkston helps classroom teachers counteract such barriers to learning. To develop ways of integrating academic content with musical themes and activities, Clarkston finds out what papers the students are writing and suggests relevant musical content. "We incorporate music history and teach vocabulary that they would use in a research paper. A great metaphor for [teaching] history is the history of the blues—Robert Johnson, B.B. King. They've learned about Bob Marley and how he fought for justice and social equality in Jamaica. We played [Marley's] 'Redemption Song.'"

Clarkston teaches ukulele and guitar for one hour twice a week. A lifelong guitarist—like Jessica Baron—he started playing the ukulele in 2012. But why teach the ukulele and then the guitar? "There's only four strings on the ukulele," he says, "It's easier to tune. It's smaller. The strings are a little more forgiving because they're nylon, so it doesn't take as much effort to press down."

Clarkston goes on to explain that after learning to play the ukulele, "they graduate



to the guitar. I think a good analogy is starting on a small bike with training wheels and then getting a bigger bike without training wheels." During their time with Clarkston, the kids spend two to three weeks learning the ukulele before transitioning to guitar. Not to worry—the uke has not been discarded! From that point on, Clarkston allots half the session time to each instrument. In fact, he says, some kids he teaches clearly prefer the ukulele.

## HOW MANY UKES DOES IT TAKE?

"I didn't know anything about the ukulele," recalls Terry Tasby, another L.A. teacher. "I took my first GITC class and found you can learn chords right away." When kids enter Tasby's class first thing in the morning, agenda item number one is for the kids to take a good look at her. Today, monkeys and bananas decorate her apron. The bold vertical stripes on her hip-length shirt suggest zebra attire, which is why she bought it. She knows that her 3–5-year-old students appreciate these touches. Between seven and 12 preschoolers make up the group. Throughout the morning, two instructional aides provide extra support. As a special education instructor, Tasby has addressed a variety of conditions that hamper students' ability to learn. "It could be autism, intellectual disability, physical issues, health issues," she says. "A lot of kids I get have speech and language impairment, which means their speech is developing slower than a typical child."

During the 2018–19 school year, Tasby had more students than ukuleles. A GITC teaching artist showed her how to organize

instruction with kids sharing the instrument. She seated them in a circle on the floor with available ukuleles in front of designated students. Each child would get a few minutes of instruction and then pass the uke on to the next child. "Routine is the key," explains Tasby, demonstrating in a louder classroom voice: "OK, we are going to put the instruments down on the floor and we are not going to touch them. OK, now you are going to pick it up. You don't touch the strings with your upper hand. . . you use your thumb and come down. . . OK, we are going to strum three times [she does this]. Yay!" By the end of the school year, she was pleased to see students holding the uke correctly and strumming, even though they weren't ready to sing while strumming.

During the pandemic, Tasby's students didn't hold ukuleles. For several months preceding the lockdown, only their teacher strummed. Nevertheless, in Tasby's hands, the uke established a powerful presence for this class of preschoolers. Just before morning and afternoon singing time, she would take it and pluck the four strings. "Then I'd sing the notes—'la-la-la-la' and I'd hear them sing 'la-la-la-la.'" In a short time, the mere sight of the ukulele signaled the time for music. Tasby let kids individually come over to pluck and strum. This combined tactical and auditory experience stimulated growing enthusiasm for singing. Tasby responded by having them sing more frequently and for longer periods. After a few months she noticed differences in behavior. "My kids for the most part had been silent. They're singing now. Kids with limited language are singing lyrics. It's amazing!"