

FROM THE TRENCHES | BY MYRNA SISLEN

# Banking in on the Uke

If you saw the 1994 film “Forrest Gump,” then you’ll remember Forrest’s army buddy Bubba, and the lecture Bubba gave Forrest about the endless versatility of shrimp. “Shrimp,” Bubba said, “is the fruit of the sea. You can barbecue it, boil it, broil it, bake it, sauté it. Dey’s uh, shrimp kabobs, shrimp creole, shrimp gumbo. Pan fried, deep fried, stir-fried. There’s pineapple shrimp, lemon shrimp, coconut shrimp, pepper shrimp, shrimp soup, shrimp stew, shrimp salad, shrimp and potatoes, shrimp burger, shrimp sandwich. That — that’s about it.”



**Lessons and giveaways are two great ways to bank in on the uke trend**

As an MI retailer, ukuleles are our version of shrimp. You have your soprano ukes, concert ukes, tenor ukes, baritone ukes, banjo ukes, plastic ukes. There are ukes for donations, uke classes for 3 to 5 year olds, uke circles for all ages, popular music arranged for uke, classical music arranged for uke, folk and Hawaiian music for uke, Beatles arrangements for uke, etc. You can even tell customers that it’s possible to major in ukulele as part of music therapy programs at universities.

Never, in my experience, has there been an instrument so versatile and reasonably priced. With great margins and little to no buy-ins, ukuleles have become a mainstay of my business. I have never seen an instrument that spans so many age groups and with so much print to back it up. So, this might be a good time to update the many uses we have found for ukuleles and the way they are helping with our bottom line.

#### MAKING THE MOST OUT OF THE UKE

I will assume that you are already stocking ukuleles and uke print music. The most encouraging trend we are finding is that customers are moving towards the more expensive instruments, and we are selling almost as many stepup ukes as entry levels. This tells us that playing levels are going up and, thus, the demand for more advanced print music is also there.

At my store Middle C Music, we have just finished another session of ukulele lessons for 3 to 5 year olds. The lessons are

30 minutes long and each six-week session ends with a little concert. We started these classes more than a year ago and they have become our fastest-growing lessons. The classes are taught by one of our piano teachers because she feels that ukulele is an excellent gateway to piano. She also has piano/uke classes for 3 to 4 year olds and 5 to 6 year olds. On the other end of the age spectrum, we offer uke circles for seniors. They meet once a week on Sunday afternoons, while the store is open. This brings in more people who buy more music and more instruments.

And then there are donations. All of us are deluged with requests for donations almost on a daily basis. I have found that the best “bang for my buck” in the ever-growing world of donations are ukuleles and uke lessons. The cost is minimal; we give an entry-level uke like the Kala Dolphin or Shark, or the Amahi Flower series, and a free lesson by a staff member — which most importantly brings a new customer into the store. The response has been overwhelmingly positive, and at the auctions, bids always go higher than posted. Everyone wins, and Middle C becomes the hero of the day. **MI**

Myrna Sislen owns and operates Middle C Music in Washington, D.C.