

## History of the Cheez Land Uke Band (CLUB)

It was on a Hawaiian vacation in 2010 that Joe Sexton purchased and became enamoured with the lowly ukulele. He already played a guitar and 5 string banjo. Upon returning home he decided that he would like to start a ukulele club in La Crosse. He put up a sign in Dave's Guitar Store that resulted in getting together with Tim Schneipp, Dave Simpkinson and Corey Schwan. Tim and Dave had played guitar together in other groups and Dave brought along Corey who worked with him. After couple of Saturday mornings at Parrish Music they met at Tim's and Joe's houses. It was at Joe's house that a La Crosse Tribune reporter took some pictures and wrote an article about a new ukulele club forming in town. The result of the article and sign at Dave's Guitar was that about 30 people showed up at Joe's office in Holmen on the first night in October, 2010. As of 2017 four of those first ukers are still active in the CLUB. They are Mike Bagneski, Audrey Helstad, Mavis Nicoli and Ben Olson, After a few weeks of meeting in Joe's office to play the group appeared in both nights of the "Old Time Variety Show" at the Pump House. There was not room on the stage for the players and music stands so the music was attached to back of the player in front with a clothespin. Joe is credited with developing the CLUB logo.

The group soon outgrew Joe's office and moved to the recital room at Leithold Music. At that time the group was divided into two groups, beginners and experienced players which met on different nights. After a short time the groups were brought back together and met as one, the beginners having learned the basic chords. Joe left the group to fend on it's own for a couple of months and then returned to the group. It was during this period that the Joe Sexton and three other founders and Joe differed on the direction the CLUB should take. They parted ways and Coulee Ukes was formed to play more commercial gigs.

Another result of the newspaper article was that it was read on line by a member of the Blue Mountain Ukulele Club (Blue MUGS) in Lawson, Australia. They contacted Joe and suggested a Transglobal Ukulele Jam between the two ukulele groups. After much planning the Cheez Land Uke Fest was held at the Valley View Mall on January 28 and 29, 2011. It was attended by ukulele players from as far away as Milwaukee. Leithold Music had displays and there were beginner instructions, group playing and singing as well as an open mic area. A large screen TV was set up and the highlight of the event was the Transglobal Ukulele Jam with a joint playing of several songs via Skype by the Cheez Land Uke Band and the Blue- MUGS. Due to the 15 hour time difference the CLUB was playing at 6:30 in the evening of the 28th and the Blue MUGs were playing at 10:30 in the morning of the 29th of January, 2011. The Skype hookup was not perfect in that the Blue MUGS could only hear the CLUB, but everyone had fun.

During the summer of 2011 Olson Davig Real Estate offered to sponsor and cover all fees for a Cheez Land Uke Band float for the Oktoberfest Maple Leaf Parade. As a group, plans were made for our float and the music to be played was discussed. A member of Olson Davig Real Estate met with the group to discuss the parade rules and conduct a dress rehearsal. The float consisted of an Oktoberfest themed & decorated semi tractor and 48' flatbed trailer. All participants were provided with Oktoberfest themed hats, tiaras, beads, and sashes. A generator run sound system with multiple speakers and microphones was installed on the float. The Group played and sang a rotation of music including; "All of Me", "Proud Mary", "Roll out the Barrel", "Do Re Mi", and "In Heaven there is No Beer". The crowd favorite quickly became "Roll out the Barrel" and "In Heaven there is No Beer" and crowds cheered for Encores. The float received News Coverage and was a talking point for Television Parade

hosts who commented they had never seen a float quite like it or more Ukulele players in one place. The float was not eligible to win a marching band prize, however many commented it was their favorite music group. A picture of of the group and float can be found on the group facebook site.

In 2011, about a year after it was formed, the CLUB moved from Leithold's to Happy Joe's Pizza in Onalaska. It was during this period that Joe decided to take a short vacation from the CLUB and left Brad Olson and Kevin Hop in charge for awhile before he returned. The CLUB continued to meet at Happy Joe's Pizza until the business closed in September, 2012, through no fault of the CLUB as many of their patrons came on Wednesdays to listen to the music as they ate their pizza. A search was made and a new home was found in the Food Court of the Valley View Mall. It was nice at the mall, plenty of room and good parking, but that ended when the construction started for Burger Fusion. The area got smaller and progressively noisier, making the mall unworkable. With the Food Court becoming unsatisfactory as a meeting place a search was made for a new location and several were tried out.

Burger Fusion opened in April, 2014 and it was immediately evident that a new meeting place was needed. The most accommodating location was found to be the Moose Lodge in La Crosse where we have been meeting weekly ever since. The Moose Lodge has been a gracious host to the Cheez Land Uke Band. They have provided us with space for our weekly sessions and storage space for our electronic equipment and loaner ukuleles. They have also provided the space and food for our annual Christmas Party and for Uke-A-Paloozas 2016, 2017 and 2018.

It was during the period at the Mall in 2012 that Joe Sexton decided to make a career change and go to barber school in Chicago, come back

for a short time and then depart for Texas at the end of the year. He met a couple of the members in a parking lot and handed over the CLUB records and copies of the music that he had collected. After Joe left, the CLUB carried on with no real leader but with shared responsibilities among a few. One of the highlights of this period was the "Theme Nights" where we would develop a playlist based on a theme, decorate the food court and even wear costumes. CLUB membership continued to grow during this time period as well as the balance in the checkbook as we collected dues from the members. Additionally, the CLUB maintained an online presence with a website, email account and a Meetup page, all of which contributed to the growth of the CLUB.

A steering committee was formed to chart the direction for the CLUB and to formalize the operation. The committee, made up of Mike Bagneski, Diane Brose, Jack Evans, Laura Moriarty, Dale Norris, Ben Olson, Melanie Pehling and Bill Trubilowicz. Many meetings were held during 2013 to hammer out the By-Laws of the CLUB. The most significant section in the By-Laws is the Mission Statement that reads: *"The Cheez Land Uke Band is a non profit organization that encourages the playing of the ukulele to promote fun and fellowship. The CLUB provides the format and structure to do so through teaching, practicing, performing and educating the members."*

Their work formed the structured organization that is presently registered with the State of Wisconsin as the Cheez Land Uke Band. The By-Laws were signed on October 15, 2013 and the first annual meeting and election was held in January, 2014.

The steering committee was appointed as the first Board of Directors (BOD) and Bill Trubilowicz was elected the first president; Ben Olson, vice president; Jack Evans, treasurer; Laura Moriarty, secretary with Diane Brose and Dale Norris serving as trustees and Mike Bagneski as the music

director.

The By-Laws require that an annual meeting of members in good standing be held with a Treasurer's Report, a report from the President and that three of the board seats come up for election. At the end of the first year, 2014, three board members volunteered to run for reelection to the BOD, meaning that in following year the other three of the BOD members would stand for election. This assured that with two year terms there would never be more than three new members on the BOD. The seventh member, the music director is a permanent member of the BOD. There has been some turnover in the Board. Bill Trubilowicz left in January 2016 and went back to Michigan. Ben Olson and Diane Brose were elected president and vice president, Dale was elected treasurer and Barb Pollack was elected secretary. Laura Moriarty left the Board in 2016 and was replaced by Roberta (Bobbie) Lang. Jack Evans left in 2017 and was replaced by Laura Huber in special elections to complete his term.

Over time, the CLUB took on a number of performance events ranging from nursing home gigs, Pump House charity events, teaching clinics at festivals and historic days and even was the front band for The Ukulele Orchestra of Great Britain at Viterbo University. For example, in 2015, the CLUB had about a dozen performance events. To quote Joe Sexton; "You will get more requests to play than you can ever fill."

Mike Bagneski, our music director was a significant addition to our board. Mike took over the leadership of the Wednesday sessions, provided instruction to our members and was instrumental in developing the CLUB songbook, which is now in version 6.2 and has grown to about 100 pages.

The CLUB continually puts its resources back into the membership

and into the community as well. The Board has brought in special guest performers for the members, hosts annual Christmas parties and has purchased loaner ukes for new students to try out. The CLUB runs weekly beginners classes, has taught the La Crosse Music Teachers our teaching methods and has purchased 23 ukuleles to donate to various charitable and educational organizations in the La Crosse area. Ukuleles will continue be donated to deserving organizations in the future. The CLUB has also taught beginner sessions at the Boys and Girls Club and continues to teach them for the La Crescent - Hokah Community Education program.

A ukulele festival was suggested by Laura Moriarty and that resulted in our first Uke-A-Palooza which was held at the Best Western in 2014 and was so successful, a second one was held in 2015. Neither event had a headline attraction, but rather depended upon workshops, group sing and open mics to augment the silent auctions and vendor tables keeping the attendees occupied. The third and fourth Uke-A-Palooza events were held at the Moose Lodge. They both featured Lil Rev as the headline attraction and were successful as well. The CLUB expects to continue to hold this annual event into the future and plans are already being made for the 2018 version of Uke-A-Palooza. At this time the featured guests will be Cool Hand Uke and Ukester Brown, both of whom have previously appeared during our Wednesday night sessions.