

DON'T
▼
GET AROUND
▼
MUCH
▼
ANYMORE
▼

the **MUSE** and **MAGIC** of **JAZZ**
UKULELE MAVEN CURT SHELLER

BY LIL REV





SHELLER (RIGHT) AND THE AUTHOR DIANE POOLE PHOTO

IF THE

ukulele world had its own trading cards, there would be no shortage of superheroes. We know their names and have heard many of them at festivals and on YouTube, except perhaps one, whose humble and unassuming manner might have caused you to overlook his cool jazz stylings. Ladies and gentlemen, allow me to introduce to you, Curt Sheller.

By day—and often into the night—Sheller plies his trade teaching an impressive load of private lessons (over 60 students a week) from Funky Frets, a music store he opened with his wife Bernadette and daughter Kelly Thompson in Boyertown, Pennsylvania.

All too often, we focus on the uke-peeps who are full-time road warriors, and in doing so, we lose sight of the foot soldiers like Curt, who are working tirelessly in the trenches of American ukulele instruction from a more rooted locale. Alongside his Bernadette and Kelly, you'll also find Curt's grandkids TJ and Ali Rose holding court at Funky Frets, leaving little doubt that this is a full-service family-run business, complete with a local clientele and students from all over the Eastern Seaboard.

Sheller's fascination with the ukulele began in earnest in 2003, when he headed out West on a ten-day camping trip and didn't want to be without a small guitar, which had been his main instrument for decades of performance. His search for a suitable instrument led him to the ukulele and it became the beginning of a journey that continues to this day.

Driven by an insatiable appetite for learning new stuff, and never one to shuck hard work, Curt's quest led him to the World Wide Web, where even in its infancy, he coded the makings of an online treasure-trove at learningukulele.com, a virtual store-house of over 600 online lessons, books and play-along tracks.

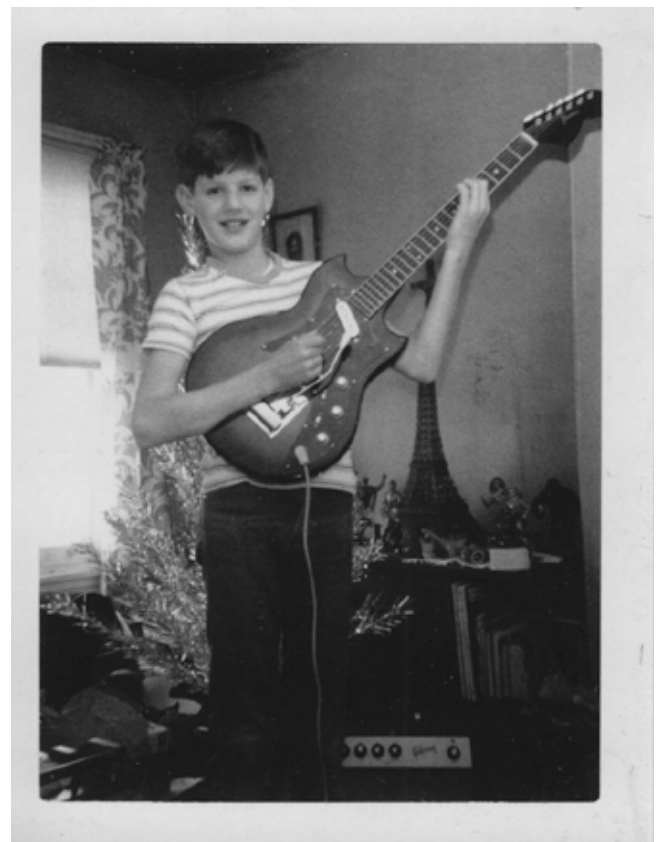
ESSENTIAL LISTENING

For a taste of Curt's work, check out his 2016 release **HOW ABOUT MORE UKE**, a sizzling and sultry collection of 14 jazz standards and originals with the Curt Sheller Jazz Trio. Available on Amazon and CD Baby.

As someone who has performed and spent a lot of time with the great ukulele jazz pioneer Lyle Ritz, I thought I would never be able to hear anyone play Duke Ellington's "Don't Get Around Much Anymore" and still be impressed. But as I sat in the audience at Curt's annual

Funky Frets Uke Fest, my jaw hung in awe, not only at Curt's breathtaking fretboard mastery, but also because his taste is impeccable and he knows something that's all too often missing in jazz ukulele—the importance of knowing which notes to leave out! This, coupled with his humility and great sense of humor, makes Sheller one of the most modest and praiseworthy players on the scene. We should note that Sheller's modesty is unrestrained and he's quick to give credit to his musical hero, eminent jazz guitar instructor Chuck Anderson, whom he's studied with for almost 30 years and to whom he gives all credit for his strengths in jazz guitar, music, theory, gigging, and music instruction.

Because Curt stays super busy juggling his teaching load, the annual Funky Frets Uke Fest and his online curriculum, he might



Curt, 1964

seem more content to be out of the limelight, but those lucky folks who've been wowed like me, rarely forget hearing Curt's finger's dance on his tenor ukulele.

Presently, Curt's go-to ukulele is a Ko'olau CS Tenor, and he's quick to remind me that Lyle Ritz played one, too! He leans towards a low-G setup and strings it up with Savarez Alliance E and A strings, and with Thomastik-Infeld flatwound guitar strings, a CF27 for the C and CF30 for the low G. This setup seems to work well for Curt and makes for well-balanced tone, while doing a lot of single-string soloing, and also lending itself to rich chordal work whenever he's comping over common Sheller standards like Kenny Durham's "Blue Bossa" or Hoagy Carmichael's "Georgia."

For the aspiring ukulele soloist, looking for inspiration in the

THE PROS SPEAK

"He's generous, good-hearted and has empowered countless players to expand their view of the ukulele."

—James Hill

"You can learn a ton just hanging out with this guy!"

—Victoria Vox

"Curt's repertoire consistently stretches the ukulele envelope by incorporating jazz, blues, and pop into a pleasantly entertaining mix."

—Gerald Ross

same muse that Bill Tapia and Lyle Ritz mined, Sheller says, "improvisation material comes from these four sources: scales, arpeggios, intervals, and sequences." Curt is right-on when he says there are no shortcuts and that you should expect to have a "a few bad music days every now and then." With his roll-up-your-shirt-sleeves work ethic, he also tells you the bare minimum for improv would be to "know the blues and minor pentatonic scales, followed by Dorian (Minor), Mixolydian (Dominant), Aeolian (Natural Minor) and Ionian (Major) scales—the six essential scales for contemporary music. Learn them in all in 15 keys and for jazz, 20!"

He says, initially you should stay in one key for everything, so that later on, one can make clear comparisons. It's all about training your fingers to follow your inner musical ear." Not looking to be a soloist? Curt Sheller would be the first to tell you: "Don't neglect rhythm. In jazz," he says, "often the chords aren't being played, so be sure to know your arpeggios and how to place the right single notes. Often, the blues maxim 'less is more' applies to jazz."

Glen Hirabayashi of the ukulele band the Aloha Boys says, "Curt's knowledge of music in general and as applied to the ukulele is absolutely phenomenal." It's this aspect of Sheller's reputation that continues to draw students to his shop as well as his festival and online lessons.

With Curt's laid-back, self-deprecating manner he'll never be one to toot his own horn, so let me close by saying that the ukulele players of this world, shall not perish without having first heard the great Curt Sheller do his thing. **U**

ERIC MAX PHOTO

