

SPECIAL FEATURE



CRAIG BRANDAU ELEGANT STYLIST OF THE UKULELE

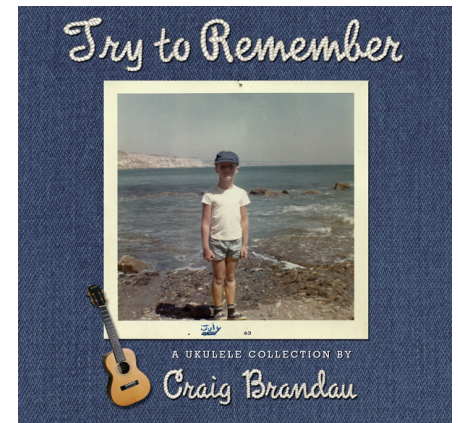
by Austin Kaiser, Ph.D.

Craig Brandau is one of the rising stars in the ukulele world. He is a virtuoso in the tradition of Lyle Ritz, Ohta-San, and Benny Chong, creating finely crafted arrangements of standards which he performs with elegance and impeccable technique. Unlike Ritz, Ohta, or Chong, however, Brandau began as a guitarist and only took up the ukulele after years of work on his original instrument. He even attended the Guitar Institute of Technology. Like so many ukulele converts, his encounter with this small Hawaiian instrument was a turning point in his musical life.

Brandau encountered another musical turning point when he began to study with the legendary guitarist and teacher Howard Heitmeyer in 1990. At the time, Brandau was still playing the guitar, but he has made extensive use of Heitmeyer's techniques in his ukulele playing. Both of his albums, *Tenderly* (2009) and *Try to Remember* (2011), feature arrangements for ukulele by Heitmeyer. The former also features an original composition that Heitmeyer wrote for his

student entitled "Craig's Waltz." Heitmeyer is not a household name, but he was a major session player and an influential musical mentor to several notable musicians, including jazz guitar great Howard Roberts (whose playing was, in turn, a major influence on Lyle Ritz). In one interview, Roberts vividly recalled Heitmeyer's extraordinary work ethic and thirst for musical knowledge. When Roberts met Heitmeyer, the latter was a complete unknown, just recently discharged from the Navy after World War Two. He was living in Phoenix and honed his craft with remorseless discipline. He even read books about arranging while eating meals in restaurants. Never had Roberts met a more knowledgeable and dedicated musical mind. Heitmeyer brings a lifetime of musical experience and expertise to the arrangements he creates for Brandau.

Brandau freely acknowledges the musical debt that he owes Heitmeyer. In the process, he may even undersell his own talents as a player/arranger. His volume of chord solo arrangements for tenor ukulele includes some excellent



arrangements by Heitmeyer, but Brandau's are equally as inventive and challenging. The book is clearly a labor of musical love. It's also a major addition to the ukulele repertory. In addition to his musical talents, Brandau is also a trained historian and teacher. We are excited to share his story with the readers of *ukulele player*.

Q: I know that you were a guitar player before you started playing the ukulele. What is your musical background? How proficient did you become on the guitar?

A: All of my musical background comes from playing guitar and ukulele. One of the very few regrets I have is that I didn't learn to play a band instrument nor how to sightread music as a child. However, I did

start playing guitar when I was nine and learned basic chords, strumming, and some fingerpicking that I still use today.

It wasn't until I was in my early twenties that I got serious about learning music theory and really working on my chops. I was lucky to have a couple of influential teachers and after being discharged from the Navy, was able to attend the "Musician's Institute (G.I.T.)" in 1983 where I learned the basics of jazz theory and then continued with a year of counterpoint instruction at a community college. However, theory is just that "theory" it's useless unless one can apply what one knows. It wasn't until I began working with Howard Heitmeyer that the knowledge I had began to slowly gel.

I'd say I was a proficient guitar player, meaning, I could sit in with various bands or musicians, but my heart was in chord melody and my ability for it did not evolve for quite some time.... Actually, I'm still waiting! I'd say that I'd hit my zenith after working with Howard for a few years.

Q: Do you play any other instruments apart from ukulele and guitar?

A: Nope, guitar and ukulele are it. Actually, the only time I play guitar now is when I have to, meaning, for my studio work, etc. I'm too cheap to pay someone else to come in and play background parts.

Q: How did you become acquainted with Howard Heitmeyer? How did he transform your approach to music? Does he play uke himself?

A: After my tenure at G.I.T. and trying to somehow "make it" in music playing in Los Angeles, I hit a wall, of sorts. I'd always loved Joe Pass's Virtuoso albums and admired many of the classical guitar-based players like Laurindo Almeida, Jose Feliciano, Earl Klugh, and Chet Atkins. I liked how their music was self-contained. These players didn't need to have a band in order to sound really good. As you may know, a band can be like a bad marriage at times with all of the drama and egos. I just wanted to play really well and make beautiful music. I eventually called "McCabe's Music" here in Santa Monica and told them of my quest— how I was looking for someone to teach me how to play jazz chord melody standards on a classical guitar. They gave me Chris Carson's number (Johnny's son), whom I gather is a fine classical guitarist. We set up lessons and just as I was getting ready to leave for Malibu, Chris called me on the phone and said that he thought Howard Heitmeyer would be a better fit for the style of music I wished to play. So my journey with Howard began in 1990 and continues to this day.

It is nearly impossible for me to describe how Howard has transformed my approach to music. I think most of my learning has come through a

sort of osmosis— hearing and playing his pieces. His influence became crystal clear when I picked up the ukulele and began making arrangements on my own. I could hear Howard's musical voice in how I was constructing the chords around the melody lines (for example: "Here, There and Everywhere," "What Are You Doing the Rest of Your Life," and "Black Orpheus," from my "Tenderly" CD). You can only imagine how happy I was when Howard agreed to work with me on the ukulele. Howard does not play the ukulele. I once asked him if he'd like me to get him a ukulele. His response was, "The notes on the ukulele are the same as they are on the guitar, but starting at the fifth fret?" I replied, "Yes." He turned his head and gave me an impatient glance and said, "Then I don't need a ukulele."

Q: What was the catalyst for your conversion from guitarist to ukulelist? Did you have to cast aside any pre-conceived notions about the ukulele before you could commit yourself to the instrument?

A: Actually, the ukulele had never really entered my mind until my wife, Cali Rose, and I were on our first flight to Hawaii (1994) and I read an article in one of those in-flight magazines about Lyle Ritz. The plane also happened to have a sample of Lyle's playing in my headphones. I couldn't believe it was a ukulele I was hearing! It sounded so guitar-like and I enjoyed his jazzy style, phrasing, and tone.

A few years later I hit another musical wall. Due to work, etc. –I didn't have enough time to really practice the guitar.

Howard's arrangements are difficult, to say the least, and need to be played over and over. Thus, practicing became a negative cycle. I was upset that I wasn't playing as well as I could and became too frustrated to practice. Eventually, and I'm not sure exactly why, the idea of the ukulele floated into my head. This was in 2001. I somehow found the Fleamarket Music webpage and became active on its bulletin board. Soon after, I purchased a natural tenor Fluke with plastic fretboard. I quickly upgraded the instrument with a rosewood fretboard so that I could play using a wound low G tuning without damaging the ukulele. By this time I'd hear Ohta-San play and fell in love with his arrangements and purchased his purple "Ukulele Masters" book. This is where my inspiration came to using a low G tuning.

Part of me wishes that I'd kept that fluke, but I literally wore out the frets! I have half-jokingly told Jim Beloff that I played that ukulele so much, I gave the fretboard a radius! I ended up giving it away via the Fleamarket marketplace board to someone who wanted to learn how to do fret jobs.

Q: I know you are a veteran. What was your job in the Navy? Did you play guitar in your free time?

A: I was a corpsman and enlisted in 1979. I was 22 and had already begun to really learn to read music, etc. After boot camp, I was stationed on a ship for 6 months (never left the harbor), then at dispensary on a naval base. Since I'd always wanted to travel and go to Japan, I volunteered to deploy with the Marines so I could go to Okinawa. Wherever I went, my guitar was with me, even on ship!

One of the most beneficial experiences I had was playing in several country bands while in Okinawa. There was a military club circuit spanning the entire island. My friend and lead guitarist, R.C. Smith ("Smitty"), owned a car and we played two-three nights per week on various bases. Though I was mostly playing rhythm, it was a great experience. I even played bass on a few gigs! Like the axiom states, "One hour on stage is worth ten hours of practice in one's bedroom." The gigs were four hours long and I was playing a solid-body Ibanez guitar that was heavier than a Les Paul! The damn thing nearly broke my back, but I wish I'd kept this guitar. It sounded and looked great. This was back when the Japanese companies were getting sued for making exact replicas of the American classics at 1/4 of the price. My friend Smitty purchased George Benson, Joe Pass and Lee Ritenour ES335 guitars, all made by Ibanez. I wish I'd done the same. While there I did purchase an Ibanez classical guitar that I still own today and used on my Try to Remember

CD. Honestly, it's not a great guitar, but does the job and is now like an old friend.

All throughout my time in the Navy I dreamed of going to G.I.T. and began working with materials they'd sent to me after I submitted an audition tape. I'd write out scales and chords in all keys and tried to piece together some jazzy sounding progressions. I also discovered a dual-cassette tape recorder. I'd never seen one of these in the states and began making songs with overdubs.

Q: I know you were nearly killed in a car accident while in the Navy. Did it have any long-term affect on your development as a musician?

A: I'm not sure what you or your readers were like in their 20s and single, but I was a chimpanzee! I was stationed in Okinawa and loving it! I even extended my time in the Navy in order to stay longer on the island.

A good friend of mine had purchased a car, something one really didn't need due to the abundance of taxis, unless they were driving long distances. Anyway, we were out drinking and though I wasn't the driver, I was foolish-drunk enough to get into a car with a driver who was a drunk as me. While making a turn, a speeding car smashed my door, pushing me over far enough that the shifter column broke my friend's left leg. I fractured my left femur and suffered numerous other injuries as a result. Within a few

months, I was released from the Navy with an honorable medical discharge and provided with educational benefits I would have otherwise not received. Musician's Institute was listed as a vocational school and the Veteran's Administration recognized the school as a valid option for my rehabilitation!

I laugh at this now because we all know the great benefits and job security being a guitar player in L.A. provides! Regardless, this incident had a huge impact upon my music and life. I was eventually able to continue my formal education, several years later, and attend UCLA where I earned both B.A. and M.A. degrees in history.

Q: Who are some of your favorite ukulele artists? Who are some of your favorite guitarists?

A: Benny Chong is my hero! He's so good, I wonder if he's the same species as you and me. Of course I love Ohta-San and Lyle Ritz. Guitar players: I listen to a lot of Laurence Juber and see him perform live almost every year. As previously mentioned, Joe Pass, Laurindo Almeida, Jose Feliciano, Earl Klugh, and Chet Atkins. I also like George Benson and some Pat Metheny. I listen to David Russell, classical player. He's my current favorite of that genre. As you can tell, my tastes are eclectic and it is impossible for me to list them all.

Q: Were you obsessed with the uke after you began playing it?

A: Yes and how! Actually, this is a better question for my wife, Cali Rose! Once I made the switch, the conversion is total and complete. There are so many reasons why I love the ukulele. First and foremost, it fits my musical ear better than the guitar. I can figure songs, melody lines, etc., much quicker. I also like its size! As Lyle Ritz says, "...[the ukulele]... just fits."

Cali is an extremely talented and long-time working musician. She picked up the ukulele shortly after I did and it has become imbedded into her musical DNA. I also should mention that early on in my ukulele playing, while visiting Oahu, I met Noa Bonk, John Kitakis's stepson and master ukulele builder for Ko'olau ukuleles. Noa is a nice introverted fellow (like me). I told him what qualities I was looking for in a ukulele and he "got" me. This was in 2001 and now six custom ukuleles later (Cali owns two), his instruments allow me to create the sound I crave.

Q: What is the L.A. music scene like for a ukulele player? I hear lots of ukes on TV commercials these days. Have you done any session work?

A: Session work?!?! LOL! Just last week and totally by chance, I met one of the few remaining session work guitar players while at an outdoor concert. For the most part, session work is dead and even if it wasn't, the competition would be fierce. ProTools and the like have decimated this part of the

industry. My teacher, Howard, who was doing session work throughout the 1950s and early 1960s, told me of a union meeting he had to attend where the musician's union had to rent out the Shrine Auditorium in order to accommodate all of their players! Those days are long gone.

While I was attending G.I.T. in the early 1980s, Tommy Tedesco was still able to eke out a living due to his monster-like sight-reading and interpretation skills. During a workshop he stated then that the chances of becoming a studio guitarist were the same as a ten-year-old boy making it into professional football.

A direct answer to your question is, no. Also, the ads I hear on TV and radio with ukulele are very simple strum patterns any studio guitarist could replicate.

Q: What are your long-term goals as a player and performer/arranger?

A: My weakest link as an artist is my lack of live performance. Getting gigs in L.A. is so hard. Even open mics are disappearing. However, Cali and I are getting more festival and workshop gigs. Cali is a great teacher for beginners and has two extremely full classes she teaches every week through our local senior center.

My immediate goal is to learn as many and as much from Howard's arrangements while he's still alive. Fortunately, at almost 91, he's going strong,

but one never knows how long this will continue.

My long-term goal is to continue what I'm doing: playing, publishing and performing. Breaking even, financially, would also be nice! I have another five years before I can retire from my school district and hope we have enough saved so that I don't have to continue to work.

Q: When can we expect your next album?

A: I'd say that your guess is as good as mine! They're very expensive and, as you know, people are not buying CDs like they used to. Our recording studio is literally across the street from where we live. Once I get a couple of songs ready to record, I schedule studio time. I've currently got four in the can, but am not sure, once I get a total of ten or so, if I'll release them as singles via CD Baby and iTunes or do a traditional CD.

Q: Your volume of jazz chord solos for ukulele is absolutely superb. How did you develop this book? Do you plan to do more in the future?

A: Thank you for the kind words! It was a labor of love and dedication to Howard. When I first started posting videos of Howard's and my arrangements, I'd get request for tablature. As you can see, both Howard and I put a lot of effort into these arrangements and I just didn't want to give them away. Moreover, I'm a believer

in doing things the legal and proper way. This way, I don't have to worry about getting sued. This led me to have a dialog with the people at Hal Leonard, which resulted in my book.

The choice of songs came as a result of two factors: My previously recorded songs, and which ones of the selection did Hal Leonard have the permission to publish. I've had requests from fans/followers to publish the sheet music to everything I've recorded, but this choice is out of my hands. I'm a very small fish in a huge ocean. Also, I haven't written out all of the songs.

As you may have deduced, I'm the one who pays for the recording (\$100.00 per hour) and to have the CD made. I write out the sheet music with the same detail and software program (Sibelius) that Hal Leonard uses. I also only get paid a flat fee for my time: I receive no royalties. Even with these expenses, I still would like to continue to publish. It's nice to know that Howard's work will be remembered and I really enjoy this process.

I'd like to thank both the author, Austin Kaiser and Craig Brandau for taking the time for this interview.

Austin has contributed several articles to **ukulele player**. We look forward to more great articles and interviews in the future.



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