

A ukulele, is in the family of stringed instruments and looks like a small, four-stringed version of a guitar. Also called a “uke,” it is tuned and played just like a guitar, with tuning going from the top string to the bottom string using G C E and A on the piano, though the ukulele is usually tuned an octave higher than the guitar. It comes in four types, or sizes: the soprano, the concert ukulele, the tenor, and the baritone.

The instrument has long been associated with Hawaii, but its origins were actually in Portugal. In the late 1870s, Portuguese sailors brought a ukulele-type instrument called the braguinha to the Hawaiian Islands. The native Hawaiians were impressed when they saw the speedy and intricate finger-work of the man playing the stringed instrument; they dubbed it a “ukulele,” which means “jumping flea” in English. In only a decade, it became Hawaii’s most popular instrument.

There is also a Tahitian version, which is quite different from the traditional model. The body of this type is carved from a single piece of wood and does not have a sound box, per se. Rather, there is a hole carved right through the middle of the instrument, which is covered with a thin piece of wood in the front. The look and sound of the Tahitian ukulele is similar to a banjo; in fact, sometimes it is referred to as a banjo.

The ukulele became popular in the United States in 1915 in San Francisco, California during the Panama Pacific International Exposition, one of the most popular world’s fairs the country has ever seen. There, the Hawaiian Pavilion presented the Royal Hawaiian Quartette, which included guitar and ukulele players. The music was a huge success, and the instrument was quickly assimilated into the mainland music culture. Within five years, vaudeville acts were including it in their performances, and the newly popular jazz culture began using the ukulele regularly.

In recent years, the ukulele is often associated with some of the more unusual and eccentric musicians, such as Tiny Tim, but many mainstream artists have experimented with it. Former Beatles Paul McCartney and George Harrison were often seen playing the instrument, as well as Jimi Hendrix, Joni Mitchell, and Elvis Presley. Today, the uke is primarily associated with folk and Hawaiian music. It is a handy instrument in that it is inexpensive, small, lightweight, and portable.