



## Dave Talsma

In the world of ukulele, luthier Dave Talsma is someone you should know.

Dave is multi-talented. He is an artist by trade, a graphic designer, master craftsman, musician, and makes some of the finest musical instruments available today.

The picture in the upper right corner of this page shows Dave at the work bench. The headstock standing close to the center of the picture is that of the Dairy Queen Uke he built for Warren Buffet.

The first time I heard one of Dave's ukuleles in action was in a recording made by Gerald Ross. What a sweet sounding tenor uke.

I wanted to interview Dave for this issue of **UKULELE PLAYER** to introduce our readers to one of the top five luthiers (in my estimation) in the business of ukulele building. In case you want to know the other four, well you can just keep guessing because I am not telling. Dave is one of them, though.

Dave has made vintage reproductions. He has made ukes with design features seen in some guitar companies

and on other types of musical instruments. He has built comical character ukes, like "Jack" from "The Nightmare Before Christmas" cartoon. He has made novelty instruments, like the "Creature" (of the Black Lagoon).

Every one of Dave's ukuleles, no matter what the inspiration, plays and sounds like a dream. You won't find a better quality instrument when you get to this level of craftsmanship.

Dave builds instruments because doing so is one of his passions and that makes all the difference in the world.

-----  
**Q:** Your website says that you grew up in a musical family. What instruments do you play?

**A:** My Dad played accordion and ukulele. He played the baritone uke in minstrel shows in the 70's, real fun, black face make-up and all. My brother has played all kinds of guitars since the time of the Beatle's and still does to this day. I played trumpet all through grade school and high school, I still own one but never touch it. I "try to make time" to play my ukuleles and guitars, mostly



electric guitar, and whatever floats my boat.

**Q:** When did you first take up ukulele?

**A:** My Dad taught me a few songs when I was young, like "Aint She Sweet" and "Dark Town Stuffers' Ball". I really changed my opinion about ukes when I made a trip to Elderly's and played a real uke, and thought, wow, these are cool.

**Q:** You are a visual artist. When did you decide to try musical instrumentmaking?

**A:** My Dad was a mechanical engineer, and I had a few summer jobs in engineering too. I went to college and got a degree in Illustration and Graphic Arts, and I have always thought of stringed instruments as visual art pieces. I decided to mix engineering and my art work to make musical art, instead of hanging flat art, this is 3D art that creates great music.

**Q:** Your website says that you have been building ukuleles and guitars since 1996, is that when you went commercial was that the actual start?

**A:** 1996 is when I built my first

guitar, a copy of a Martin D-18. It came out so good I was hooked and began making them for friends and people who were willing to pay for them. After about 12 guitars my attention turned to the ukulele. There are a lot of custom guitar builders, but very few makers of ukes at a level I am doing.

**Q:** How many ukuleles have you built to date? How many guitars? Are there any other instruments?

**A:** Let's see, ten guitars, acoustic and electric and eighty two ukuleles and one mandolin.

**Q:** How many ukuleles do you build per year on average?

**A:** I make about twelve or so per year, depending on how complex. I try to stay away from the workbench during our short Michigan summers. I also have been teaching a student to build ukes too. Oh, and did I mention I work full time too.

**Q:** Did you start with your own ukulele designs or copies of classic ukes?

**A:** I started with my own designs, but I also do recreations of classics, mostly Martin styles. I have the most fun when I have full control and just to do something cool and new. Like the Beatle Bass Tenors and the Phantom models. My painted pineapples are unlike any available; the tops look more like a photo. I also love to do transparent colors over figured woods.

**Q:** How long a waiting list do you presently have?

**A:** It varies from six to twelve months. I try to double up and build two that are similar at the same time.

**Q:** From start to finish, how long does a simple uke design take to build?

**A:** It takes me about six to eight weeks, the finish process takes a month in itself with curing times.

**Q:** How about a fully adorned uke with lots of inlay?

**A:** Yes, I do all inlay work myself. I did a hummingbird headstock that was made with over thirty pieces, and used a real emerald for the eye. I'm currently building a Martin 5K tenor copy, lots there to detail.

**Q:** I see that you have made all sizes of ukes, what size is the most popular seller?

**A:** It seems the tenors are always popular. I also do a lot of in-between scales too. Some call them super scales.

**Q:** Have you made any extended scale models?

**A:** I can do either 12 or 14 frets to bodies, sometimes it's a good thing, sometimes not.

**Q:** Do you have a particular favorite uke that you've built?

**A:** I say that about each one, but the next is always better. I build each one as if it's for myself, it must be perfect. I think

Some of Dave's wonderful creations...



the Beatle Bass tenors I have done are stunning to see, something that I find hard to believe that I actually made from raw materials.

**Q:** Do you built the cases, too?

**A:** I have made a couple cases, that's a whole different thing that I really don't have time for, I leave that to the pros. I have been having Cedar Creek make all my custom cases for me now.

**Q:** Do you do restorations of vintage ukes?

**A:** Yes I have restored many ukes, guitars and violins, some simple and some brought back from the dead.

**Q:** Greg Hawkes has one of your painted pineapple Ukes. Are there any other "famous" rock musicians that have one of your ukes?

**A:** Greg is the star, but I have made many for really great players too, Including Marcy Marxer, two time Grammy winner. I love to hear my ukes played by someone who can bring them to life, a feeling I can't even begin to describe.

**Q:** Do you have any future goals you can share with us?

**A:** I currently work a 40 hour day job as a graphic artist, my goal is to go full-time with the luthier business. At this time its still a hobby of mine that pays for fun toys in my life, but I'm still having fun doing it - so that's what really matters.

# **SUNCOAST UKULELEFEST** APRIL 8-11, 2009

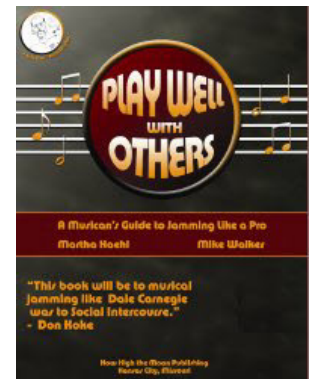


A TUNEFUL TONIC FOR TROUBLED TIMES

[http://www.suncoastukulele.com/Suncoast\\_UkuleleFest/Home.html](http://www.suncoastukulele.com/Suncoast_UkuleleFest/Home.html)

## Book Review

**P**lay Well With Others, by Martha Haehl and Mike Walker is an insightful tome that will teach you how to play well with a group of other musicians. The principles apply to any genre of music but it was written for ukulele players.



Fledgling musicians often have trouble jamming with other players. It's hard to play with other people when you have never done so.

Haehl and Walker joined forces to create a simple, easy to follow method of learning how to jam with other musicians and sound good in the process. They take a common-sense approach to keeping time, learning to follow the leader, understanding rhythm, and even learning how to transpose songs to another key.

The book is illustrated with cute little cartoons to enhance each lesson and explain each principle of music. I know lots of people that could have shortened their learning curve if this book had been available years ago.

For new musicians wanting to become involved in jam sessions, Play Well With Others is just the ticket.