



UkeTalk Interview

Dave Talsma

Talsma String Instruments

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Special thanks to Dave Talsma for this interview!

Visit the Talsma String Instruments website. And a tip of the ukulele to John Kavanagh for conducting the interview!

Here's John Kavanagh's uke talk with Dave Talsma...

**Q: Tell me about yourself, Dave.**

Dave Talsma: I work full time as a graphic artist, with a BFA degree in Illustration. I build only about ten to twelve ukes a year. To me building custom ukes is a way of combining art and engineering. Instead of looking at my art, you can make music with it.

I built my first instrument in 1995, a Martin D 18 mahogany guitar kit which took me about 2 months to complete. After that I felt hooked, since it came out so well. Next was a mandolin, which I still have and never play - mandos are not my thing - but it's pretty and sounds great, can't part with it.

After that came about eight to ten different guitars. I do all my lacquer spraying at a nearby custom bicycle shop, and one of the guys working at the shop asked about building a soprano ukulele. After some research I got a Martin plan, and built him one from maple and mahogany with dolphin shaped sound holes. I felt it came out great; he still enjoys it also.



My father, Ray Talsma, has played the baritone uke all my life (I'm 45), so that's my connection to the uke. I built a baritone for my dad as a gift about six years ago. I think it was so nice looking that he was actually afraid to handle it - it's now in his home in Florida, still like new.

Many of the models that I have done are hand painted and shaped, sometimes theme based on movies or characters, or periods of design. I now have a waiting list running about one year. All are custom built with input from me and the customer - truly one of a kind, each one different.

Sometimes I feel a little closed in and have to break out something just for the fun of it, like the Jack Skellington uke or The Ukulele from the Black Lagoon. At the moment I feel that I have just begun to do what I'm capable of dreaming up and achieving.

**Q: It sounds like your skills are mostly acquired through experience, starting with the kits. Did you do serious cabinetwork before that first guitar? Have you worked with other luthiers since?**

Dave Talsma: I have worked with all kinds of mediums, including wood, more in line with art. I built my first guitar and mandolin with help from a well-known local luthier named Grady Jones. I have never been into any serious woodworking, more in the lines of sculpture. I have even won a few national snow-sculpting events.

**Q: Do you play much yourself? What do you like for your own instruments?**

Dave Talsma: I do play ukulele and guitar, although I have a lot to learn. I tend to spend more time building than playing. The concert size is my favorite to play. Other than my own ukes that I have built, I play my National most. If I ever get the time, I would like to build myself a cedar top tenor. I also plan to order a Tele- style uke from Joel Eckhaus.

**Q: You said every uke is built for a particular customer. Can you describe the process when someone commissions a uke, what you ask him or her?**

Dave Talsma: Most customers have either seen or played one of mine; they already have a good idea what they want. I will talk them through the process of what kind, size, and top wood will suit the sound they're looking for. After that, a 10% to 15% deposit is required of the final price and a wait of about 8 months to finish.



**Q: Has anyone ever asked for something on a uke that you thought was a bad idea? How do you deal with that?**

Dave Talsma: I think most people trust me about what will look and sound good. If it's a really bad idea, I just tell them to find another luthier. I did have a guy who wanted a painted top pineapple built with a painting of Frankenstein on the back. I said no thanks.

**Q: Here's another side of that - are there some less-usual features that you'd like to see on more ukes? What do you think about zero frets, for instance?**

Dave Talsma: I would like to see more ukes using woods such as maple, walnut, cherry... Koa is pretty, but not always the best sounding. I have no real thoughts on the zero frets, I'm sure it's fine, but I don't see any advantage to the sound.

**Q: What woods do you like to use? And how are they different from each other?**

Dave Talsma: I use koa more than anything - looks great when finished. On any of my painted ukes I like to use spruce and maple. Maple really takes on color and finishes well with it being so creamy white in color. I recently finished a concert uke with a red spruce top, also known as Adirondack spruce. I think that's about the best sounding top I have used so far. Most guitar builders feel it's the holy grail of tone woods; I believe it too.

**Q: Yes, me too - red spruce top with a mahogany back and sides seems to my all-around favourite. To my own ears, mahogany is a chunkier sound - notes in a strummed chord blend together nicely, but the spruce is clearer and sweeter, responds quicker, better for picking. Is Koa like mahogany in sound, or better?**

Dave Talsma: It's hard for me to give you a real reason, but the mahogany top sounds kind of thuddy, dead sounding. It's my least favorite soundboard.

I play with more of a finger picking style; the spruce tops suit my tastes for that. I think koa is a better soundboard than mahogany, clearer tone. I try to steer customers from getting a 5A curly koa for the top - the lesser straight grain will almost always sound better, but most want the 5A top anyway because of the incredible looks.

**Q: The sculptured uke shapes on your site are amazing. Have you learned things from building them about how body shape affects sound? Does it affect your more standard-shaped ones?**

Dave Talsma: I think my bodies have gotten a little thicker in depth. I also have a lot of curve on the back, almost bowl shaped, it projects more sound, is stronger and looks cool too. The only problem is cutting the binding ledge is a challenge with such a curved back.

**Q: As a builder, do you think a uke is different from a guitar, or is it just smaller?**

Dave Talsma: To me it is like a very delicate, simple guitar. I like to build as light as possible. I see a lot of ukulele builders over-bracing and making things just to stiffen, make sure it will last a hundred years, but I would rather make them play lively without having to wait years to open up - not saying my ukes are not meant to last a lifetime also.

**Q: When a ukulele neck joins the body at the 14th fret (as opposed to the 12th fret), the bridge must be placed in a different location than with a 12 fret neck. How do you feel that affects the sound?**

Dave Talsma: Yes, the 14th fret neck will place the bridge farther down the top, not really in the sweet spot. Sometimes I will come up with a totally new scale length to get it in a better location.

**Q: Does the size or material of the bridge make a difference in the sound of the instrument?**

Dave Talsma: I try to keep my bridges as light and as small as possible. I think this is a whole lot more important than what the saddle is made of - the lighter bridge will transmit vibrations better.

**Q: Do you tap-tune the tops? How important is top thickness?**

Dave Talsma: Yes, I can feel and tap the top in locations, to tell how much thinner to go, sometimes just rubbing it will tell you. I also hum into the sound hole for idea of sounds too.

**Q: To sum it up, what's the difference between a good luthier and a good cabinetmaker? Where does the musical part come in?**

Dave Talsma: Wood has a certain ring to it, I'm not sure a cabinetmaker will notice that. I think it takes a certain person to know what that ring is. To me it's kind of like how birds chirp in tune - it's a natural thing for a good luthier to know what sounds right or wrong.

**Q: Could you build full time now? Have you thought about it?**

Dave Talsma: I think about building full time many times every day, but I still have my day job as a graphic artist. Maybe I'm just a little scared wondering if I could really support my family from it. I also wonder - will the fun go away when it really becomes a job and something I have to do?

Many thanks to Dave Talsma for this UkeTalk interview. Conducted by John Kavanagh. Images courtesy of the Talsma String Instrument website. Please visit the Talsma String Instrument website.

