

Mike Wimpres : Northampton U3A

At a U3A New Members welcome meeting, the speaker was presenting the case that anyone with 'skills' out of the ordinary should share their knowledge with other members by starting an interest group.

I idly said: "Could I start a Ukulele Group?"
"Sign here." she said, "You're on."

The initial set up was easy, a briefing on Health and Safety, instruction on the disciplinary code and the importance of not striking a truculent member.

The ukulele workshop was advertised on our U3A web page, and the initial sessions attracted a few would-be players. Fortunately some had played before so it didn't take long to get started and pull out some cheerful songs at a reasonable standard.

Membership grew session by session, and the demand to bring new material for their hungry fingers was unrelenting. The need to make everything readily available was apparent, so it became pressing to devise a form of mass communication.

Accordingly, the next step was launching a website with the facility to store and catalogue the songs. Never having done such a task before it made interesting research.

To float a no-cost, easy-to-maintain website I had to suffer some sleepless nights and early mornings wrestling with the problem, but eventually managed to launch my site last May.

It's not hard to find songs from other ukulele groups. There are at least a million groups with their own sites, brimming with song charts, arrangements, videos and instructional material. Uke players must be the most gregarious people on the planet. They share and share alike, (or should it be tear and share alike because all the content is ripped off from somewhere else?).

That's the ethic or lack of it.

By the summer, the U3A picnic loomed, and my contact in the management thought it would be sporting if we demonstrated our musical achievements in this prestigious showpiece event, and we timidly accepted the challenge.

We were slightly surprised to find we were top of the bill, not just a side stall or quiet wallpaper music for the picnic, but centre stage and upfront with a 20-minute spot to fill.

A Year in the Life...



The Dirty Dozen photo: Colin Hovland

Panic stations! it's a daunting thing to go through half a dozen numbers fluff free in front of an audience – a far cry from messing about in a church hall with only ourselves as judge and jury for a couple of hours. Anyway we were committed, and a brave 'dirty dozen' practised a repertoire of songs and polished them until they were almost recognisable.

The big day came and fortunately it was a blazing day, one of many last summer, and the concert went well. We tramped through the set, hoping not for an encore because we didn't have one. It was good, not perfect, because we fudged and fluffed, but we got away with it and ended up smiling, perspiring and thankful it was over. Then came a slight anti-climax as we thought: this was fun! Maybe we could do this again sometime.

The group still enjoys the fortnightly sessions – smiles and sounds abound. Each member extracts all the pleasure he or she can from the simplest of musical instruments, which played singly sounds small and timorous, but jointly the output is uplifting and tremendous.

From the point of view of a group leader, it is most rewarding to see the enjoyment and achievement provided by running the group; the collaboration and encouragement to progress to more and more ambitious songs. That impulse to initiate the group at the new member's meeting is certainly not regretted.