



Makin' Music!

Clemson music minister is crafting his own sounds

story by Brett McLaughlin | photos courtesy of Ryan Forbes



Ryan Forbes has been making music for more than four decades. In the past few years, however, he has taken makin' to a whole new level!

In 2016 the eldest of Forbes' two sons asked the music/worship minister of First Baptist Clemson for a ukulele as a gift. His father obliged. A few years later, a friend brought a ukulele and a kazoo to a Christmas party.

The rest, as they say, is history.

"I played the guitar earlier, but I never really excelled," he said. "It occurred to me that my stubby fingers could handle four strings better than six strings, and that I could use a ukulele in my ministry; you know, play it as I sang."

So, he bought an inexpensive model.

As one might expect from a man who holds undergraduate and graduate degrees in music and has been directing music, youth and worship ministries across the Southeast for 44 years, it didn't take long to kindle his desire to be a better ukulele performer.

"I quickly found out how popular the ukulele is," he said. "There are free training videos on the internet or a lot of people hire a teacher. It's easy to learn."

Personally, he honed his playing skills and expanded his use of the instrument. That prompted a desire to have a better instrument than his "medium quality" ukulele, with which he had never been entirely happy.

He embarked on an internet search that proved more daunting than he expected.

"It was hard to find what I wanted at the price I wanted," he smiled, noting that it was during his search he came across the website of luthier Jay Lichty or Tryon, NC, a builder of one-of-a-kind custom guitars, ukuleles and fiddles, some of which are being played by professionals from Australia to Nashville.

"What I saw on his site were what could only be called 'works of art,' but they cost up to \$5,500," Forbes said.

Despite the price, he reached out to Lichty, who graciously talked with him for over two hours. Among his suggestions was that he start by buying a "cheap" ukulele kit to build. He did, and a spark was lit.



Professional player Dani Joy purchased this ukulele from Forbes at a festival in Michigan. She later played it and posted a review on YouTube.

This is one of Forbes' creations, which has several unique features, including sound holes shaped like musical notes and a unique wood grain top.

“I had some background in woodworking, so I decided to try and make a second one from scratch,” he recalled. “Before I knew it, it was a serious hobby. I had a real passion for it.

“I was building a workshop in the basement when Covid hit. I had more time at home, and I built my first one. I was very pleased,” he said.

Today, he remains an active music and worship minister, but he also considers himself a custom ukulele builder. He could build an instrument in a couple of weeks but he indulges his “hobby” only on a part-time basis, estimating that it may take up to two months to finish a ukulele depending on what the customer has asked for.

Ukuleles come in four sizes — soprano, concert, tenor and baritone — and are crafted from exotic woods such as Koa from Hawaii, Myrtle or Indian or Brazilian Rosewood.

“Those woods all have good resonance,” he explained. “Some have brighter tones and other are more mellow. It all depends on what you want.”



Forbes is shown hard at work in one of the creative stages of crafting a custom ukulele. Much of the design and crafting requires a fine eye.



These are links to videos showing Ryan Forbes making ukuleles and a video of professional player Dani Joy performing on and reviewing one of Forbes' creations.

<https://youtu.be/i7gYxIMQ20Q>

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=QVnNmPr8f8A>

<https://youtu.be/am5U08i58aQ>



Repair - Refresh - Update We Do Everything Glass



HOME

- Glass Shower, Door, and Tub Enclosures
- Fogged Window Repair
- Window and Door Glass Replacement
- Custom Mirrors
- Glass Table Tops
- Kitchen Cabinet Glass
- Porch Conversions



AUTO

- Mobile Service
- 12 Month Breakage Guarantee
- Windshield/Chip Repair
- Convenient, Expert Installation



BUSINESS

- Board-up Service
- Security Mirrors
- Store Fronts
- Commercial Doors
- Sneeze Guards



GLASS DOCTORTM

a neighborly company

Locally Owned and Operated Franchise

864.614.5454 • GlassDoctor.com/Seneca-SC
518 W North 1st Street • Seneca, SC 29678

Likewise, Forbes offers his customers a shopping list of features some of which are esthetic while others directly impact playability. For instance, the bindings that hold the pieces of wood together vary in style, rosettes or decorations can be added around the sound hole, an armrest bend can be added, or the scale of the instrument can vary by contracting or expanding the distance between the frets.

At any given time, there may be up to a half-dozen ukuleles in various stages of construction in his small workshop.

Forbes has created a web page and has video features on YouTube, including one featuring professional ukulele performer Dani Joy, who purchased one of his creations at a Michigan festival and did an online review of its playability. Periodically, he attends similar festivals throughout the country.

“My proudest festival is my inclusion in the La-Conner Guitar Festival near Seattle last year,” he said, noting that he hopes to attend the invitation-only show next year as well. “There are only 48 luthiers displaying their instruments, and they are amazing.”

For now, Forbes said his craftsmanship is “an expensive hobby.” But he is trying to get his name out and hopes to eventually have enough work to support his hobby.

“If there’s anything more than that, it would just be icing on the cake,” he said. ■

You can see Forbes’ work at, [RyansUkes.com](https://www.RyansUkes.com) or check out his recent activity on Facebook at <https://www.facebook.com/RyansUkes>.



There are a host of features from which customers may choose. Some, such as a Clemson Paw-shaped sound hole, the style of the tuners or the colorful edging on the headstock are esthetic. Others have more impact on the playability of the instrument.



Periodically, Forbes attends festivals throughout the country. He is most proud of having been accepted to be the only ukulele luthier at the La-Conner (WA) Guitar Festival.