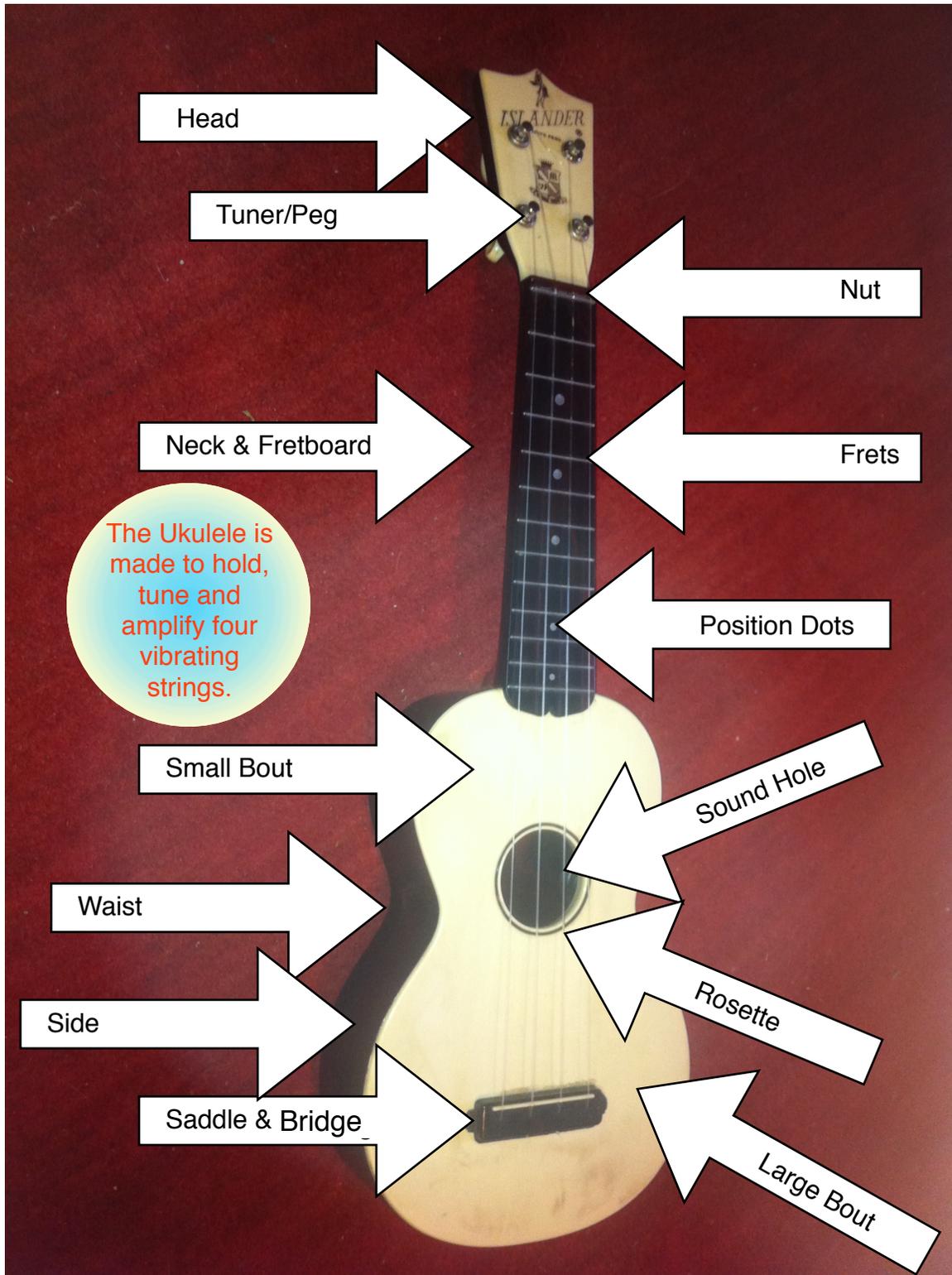
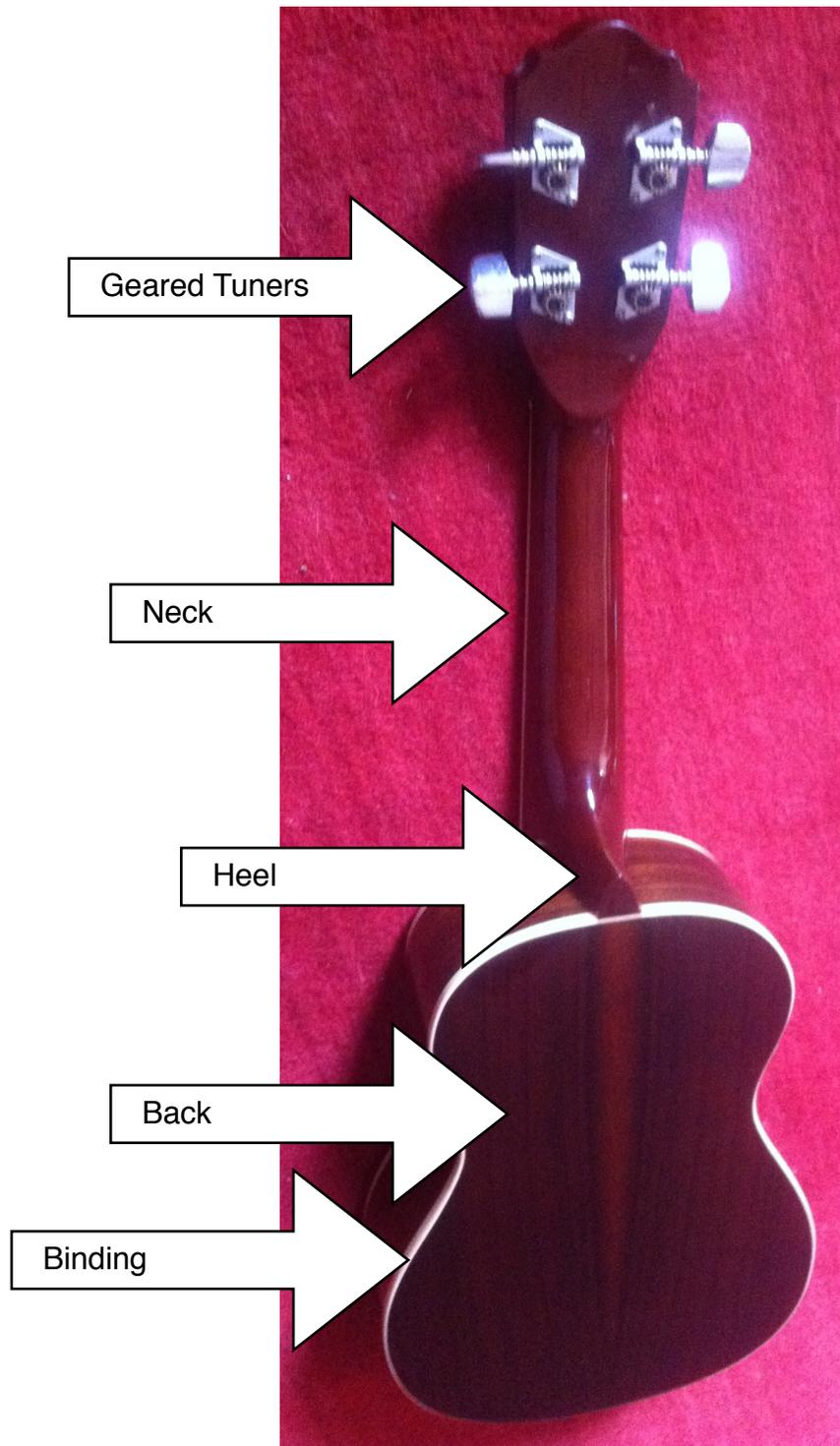


THE NAMING OF PARTS: THE UKULELE



THE NAMING OF PARTS: THE BACK OF THE UKE



THE NAMING OF PARTS: A GLOSSARY

Strings are the defining element of the ukulele. Originally ukulele strings were made of animal gut, but these days are made of nylon or some other high-tech plastic. Sometimes the C string is wound, i.e., a wire wrapped in a finer, soft metal wire. Ukulele strings can last a year or more, but should be replaced when dirty, when they develop little cuts, or when they just sound dull. New strings can sometimes take a while to settle down. One trick is to tune it up a few steps higher, play the instrument like a Republican high on convention flag juice, then tune it back to standard pitch. Usually the string is secured on one end by a large knot secured in a hole and groove in the saddle, and on the other end by threading it once or twice through the tiny hole in the tuning peg.

The Head, Neck and Heel are usually one solid piece of wood, often maple, koa or mahogany. In fancier ukes, there may be several laminations of wood for strength, appearance or whim. In some older ukes the neck is slotted to hold the frets. Most ukes today have a separate fretboard for that purpose which is glued to the top of the neck. That wood is often ebony, rosewood or maple. Some Harmony ukes of yore had replaceable plastic fretboards that screwed onto the neck and included both frets and the nut. The nut determines one end of the “open” (unfretted) strings. The neck extends from the body to hold the nut out there, as well as the tuners. The head is that portion of the neck where the tuners are mounted. Some necks these days are reinforced with ebony or carbon fibre rods embedded through its length.

Tuners on the earliest ukuleles were made of wood like violins. Today they are generally steel friction pegs with plastic paddle handles, or geared tuners with “mouse ears” to the side. PegHed tuners are a modern 4 to 1 geared tuner that looks like an old-time wooden tuner. Most tuners get sloppy with use over time, but can be tightened by a small screw at the end of the paddle.

The Nut can be considered the zero fret, although some European maker actually put a zero fret in front of the nut. The difference between the nut and a fret, though, is that the nut has slots cut into it to keep the strings evenly spaced apart, and a fret is simply a wire. Nuts can be made of metal, bone, ebony, plastic and modern composites. Slots should be cut so that they follow the angle of the head. If a slot is cut too low, the string will buzz or be deadened by the first fret. If it is too high, the string will go sharp when pressed behind the first fret and the player’s fingers will quickly be pained. Generally speaking, a credit card should slide under the string and the first fret easily but snug.

Frets and Dots. The neck and/or fretboard sports a series of wires that follow the ascending chromatic scale as they progress from nut to bridge, or more accurately, the body. Each fret is one half step. For example, the open A string becomes A# or Bb when the space between the nut and the first fret is depressed. The next fret gives a B, the next C, the next C#, and so on. Older frets were simple wires, but today’s frets are a bit wider and shaped like a T, with the stem fitted into the slot on the neck or fretboard. After years of use, some instruments can be made to play much better with a refret job, in which each fret is removed a new one inserted and glued. When a fret becomes loose in its slot, it will sit too high and cause the tones made by the frets directly in front of it to be dull. The entire fret board should be “dressed” lightly when strings are replaced — a couple of quick swipes with fine sandpaper, steel wool, or even a ScotchBrite pad the entire length of the fretboard. The dots are commonly placed at the fifth, seventh, tenth and twelfth frets, sometimes even higher. Their job is to help players know where they are. Some instruments even have dots along the edge of the fretboard so they can be more easily seen by the player. The dots can be painted or inlaid, simple or complex glyphs.

Sound Holes are usually round, but some are oval and some luthiers today are experimenting with variations to distinguish themselves from others. The purpose is to let the sound out and to allow the body of the ukulele to reverberate. The **Small Bout** favors the high tones and is in front of the hole, and the **Large Bout** favors the deeper, lower tones. The **Waist** separates the two bouts. The original ukuleles built by Nunes, Santos and Dias had very long waists and narrow bouts. Today's instruments are significantly wider in all respects. The body can be made of a variety of woods. The tops often are spruce, with Sitka spruce being popular. Koa, a hardwood native to Hawaii, is a favored wood by most manufacturers of quality instruments. Mahogany, maple, cedar, redwood, applewood, pine, even cigar boxes, have been the choices of luthiers the world over.

The Heel is important to the player — it's gotta' feel good — and to the luthier — it's gotta' look good and properly secure the neck to the body and withstand the strain of stretched strings being energetically strummed. Traditional quality instruments use a type of dovetail fit. Older cheap ukuleles used a wooden dowel pin. Today, expert luthiers use the dovetail and a heavy bolt.

Bindings and Rosettes do more than look good. Bindings strengthen the edges of the body and sometimes the edges of the fretboard. Rosettes add strength to the perimeter of the sound hole. Bindings can be very simply or very ornate and have many courses. Plastic, abalone, rosewood, ebony, redwood, spruce, maple, many materials are used to make a variety of binding styles. They may or may not add to the sound of the instrument. Depends on who you talk to. But they sure can look good and may help make the player want to play even more.