

Jake Shimabukuro – *The Greatest Day*

Every major artist has that one defining album or performance, but for ukulele master Jake Shimabukuro, his entire career has been filled with such magical achievements. Since he first came to the world's attention with his deeply beautiful and original take on George Harrison's "While My Guitar Gently Weeps" in a viral video that dominated YouTube in 2005, the Hawaiian-born Shimabukuro has virtually reinvented the four-string instrument, causing many to call him "the Jimi Hendrix of the ukulele."

"I just wanted to play the ukulele my way, which turns out to be very different from what everybody else has done," says Shimabukuro, who started playing the instrument at the age of four and learned the basics from his mother, Carol. "Most people just strummed the ukulele, but I started playing melodies, and a new world opened up – I was singing through the ukulele."

As soon as music fans got a listen to Shimabukuro's virtuosic approach to the ukulele, they were hooked. Albums such as *Gently Weeps*, *Peace Love Ukulele* and *Grand Ukulele* topped the Billboard World Music Charts, and as a live performer he became one of the hottest tickets around, headlining the Hollywood Bowl, Lincoln Center and the Sydney Opera House (he even performed for Her Majesty Queen Elizabeth II) while making frequent appearances on media outlets like *The Today Show*, *Good Morning America*, *Jimmy Kimmel Live!* and *Late Night with Conan O'Brien*.

In 2016, Shimabukuro recorded the all-original *Nashville Sessions* at Music City's famed Ronnie's Place studio with producer R.S. Field (Steve Earle, Webb Wilder) and the ace rhythm section of bassist Nolan Verner and drummer Evan Hutchings. And now he's returned to the same city and studio – and with the same gang, too (augmented by guitarist Dave Preston) – for his newest record, *The Greatest Day*, which will be released on August 31, 2018.

"On the last record, it was pretty much the sound of a live trio, which sounded fresh, raw and organic," says Shimabukuro. "Now we've expanded to a quartet, which has added more colors and variety to the overall production. Once we recorded the live takes, we experimented with overdubs, and added horns, strings and keys, and other funky sounds. There are even some vocals on a few cuts."

The 12 studio tracks that comprise *The Greatest Day* feature some of Shimabukuro's most imaginative and adventuresome playing yet. Half of the album is devoted to originals, on which the instrumentalist reaches new heights of compositional distinction. And on the covers, Shimabukuro's prodigious skills allow him to transcend his material – no mean feat considering some of the classics and standards he's tackling.

Among the self-penned tunes, there's the blissed-out title track, so effervescent and airy that it transports the listener into the clouds. Shimabukuro wrote the song the night before going into the studio. After laying down parts with Verner and Hutchings, he

watched Dave Preston add a joyous, Edge-like guitar riff that completed the picture. “It came together so quickly,” Shimabukuro says, “and when I heard the final mix, I just thought, ‘Wow, this has been the greatest day!’”

“Pangram” has already turned heads in concert. Titled after a sentence that uses all the letters in the alphabet (“like ‘the quick brown fox jumps over a lazy dog’”), it’s based on a chromatic scale that utilizes all the notes in the Western music scale. But even non-musicologists will ride happily along its rivers of cascading melodies and its pumping, rock-soul rhythms.

Another treasure is “Straight A’s,” a carefree and vibrant gem guaranteed to lift spirits, on which Shimabukuro’s soulful soloing recalls one of his influences, Carlos Santana. The song was inspired by the A string on the ukulele. “I wanted to write something where the ‘A’ note could ring out through the entire song.”

“Mahalo John Wayne” is a flat-out stunner, a delicate melody that transforms into a grand-scale cinematic symphony. Discussing its origins, Shimabukuro explains that his father’s favorite actor is John Wayne (“He named me Jake after one of the Duke’s characters, in the movie *Big Jake*”), and the two of them would often watch Westerns together. “Those are some great memories of mine,” he says, “so I’m saying ‘thank you’ to John Wayne for my name in this song. In Hawaiian, ‘mahalo’ means ‘thank you.’”

As always, Shimabukuro’s playing has a wonderful innocence to it, as if each phrase feels new to him. This sense of discovery is abundant on his astonishing reinterpretations of the Beatles’ “Eleanor Rigby,” now a driving and insistent ballad brimming with furious jazz chords and a spirited back-and-forth between Shimabukuro and dobro legend Jerry Douglas. “It was such an honor to have Jerry guest on the record,” Shimabukuro says. “He was only going to play on one tune, but we had such a great time that he stayed and played on two more tracks.”

The two go toe to toe on Jimi Hendrix’s freak-flag classic “If 6 Was 9,” spiraling off into a spacey, jazz-rock odyssey that manages to be reverential to the original while simultaneously distinguishing itself as a bold new tour de force. Shimabukuro’s wild wah-wah lines form transfixing sheets of sound, and he even pulls off a neat trick, varying some of his melodies to recall another Hendrix standard, “Little Wing.” “I wanted to throw in something unexpected, because that’s what I felt like Hendrix would do.”

The Zombies’ psychedelic rock nugget “Time of the Season” was one Shimabukuro often heard in his house growing up, and on *The Greatest Day* he trips into nostalgia with an elegant rendition that features some of his smoothest, Wes Montgomery-like phrases. “I couldn’t wait to play this one for my parents,” he says. “As soon as they heard it, they were like, ‘Oh, wow! You covered the Zombies!’ They thought that was pretty cool.”

The Greatest Day concludes with a sparse yet exquisite reading of Leonard Cohen's iconic hymn "Hallelujah." Each line that Shimabukuro plays seeps into one's heart and soul, proving that music is indeed the universal balm. "I had recorded it before, but after Cohen passed I wanted to re-record it – I felt a new emotional response to it. It seemed like the perfect way to end the album."

Only he didn't end it there: Shimabukuro was particularly excited about his playing on a recent round of dates with bassist Nolan Verner and guitarist Dave Preston. The addition of a guitarist allowed him to solo more expressively than ever before. The digital edition of *The Greatest Day* includes a beautiful live version of "Blue Roses Falling" that features Shimabukuro dueting with cellist Meena Cho as well as a concert recording of "Kawika" (originally made famous by the Sunday Manoa).

The CD and vinyl versions of the album include both tracks along with three more cuts including immersive takes on "While My Guitar Gently Weeps" and Shimabukuro's own "Dragon." There's even a slinky, ultra-funky interpretation of Bill Withers' hit single "Use Me" that sees Preston showing off his soulful vocal chops. They were recorded live with no overdubs at various venues by engineer Brett Lind and mixed by Jack Clarke (who engineered *Nashville Sessions* and *The Greatest Day*).

Shimabukuro has already been performing some of the material from *The Greatest Day* live, and he'll soon work more songs into his set. In mid-July, he embarks on an extensive tour of the U.S. and a fall tour of Japan. "I'm really excited to play the new songs in my shows," he says. "Making this record was one of the highlights I've had in the studio. I couldn't be happier with the sounds and arrangements. But most of all, we had a ton of fun making it."