

A Conversation with Jake Shimabukuro
by Frank Goodman (1/2008, Puremusic.com)

Let's begin by saying that Jake Shimabukuro's version of *While My Guitar Gently Weeps* had some time ago already been viewed on youtube over *a million and a half* times. I don't see it up there now, so that's another story, no doubt.

But this "Jimi Hendrix of the ukulele" (that's oo-koo-lay-lay, and while we're at it, shim-ah-BOO-koo-row) has been knockin' 'em dead all over the world by himself with his tiny instrument and his flawless, incendiary renditions of classic and original tunes. He's also an ambassador between his two cultures of Hawaii and Japan, a topic we cover in more depth in the spirited conversation to follow. He was a joy to interview, since his generous and beyond courteous nature was so disarming, in every sense of the word.

Jake is also a composer, and has recently written the entire score for the Japanese hit film, *Hula Girl*. He details how working with the Jimmy Buffet gang on the music for his movie (while a star on tour with Jimmy and the Coral Reefer Band) gave him some of the background he was soon to need and put right to use in his first film score.

There are and have been so many pitifully lame examples of how musicians should be and should carry themselves, that it's small wonder so many of them grow up twisted, or not at all. When I meet a very rare musician like Jake Shimabukuro, I want to hold him up and say, "Be like this guy." He would certainly be embarrassed to hear that, which speaks to my point.

But the real point is his music, which is totally flabbergasting, and needs to be heard. (And seen--thank you, youtube!) This latest EP, *My Life*, is very representative of his live show: very simple, mindblowing and mostly solo versions of songs. No effects (something for which he'd also been notorious), just clean, tasty, soothing and inspiring mastery. Check this man out, and get some oo-koo-lay-lay going on in your life. We have.

Puremusic: First of all, I'll try not to sound too amazed, even though your playing seems to have a jaw-dropping effect on people.

Jake Shimabukuro: [laughs]

PM: But I've been reading so much and listening to your record so much the last few days, it's like the ukulele is the new soundtrack to my world. It's a very interesting sound bath to have immersed myself in.

JS: Oh, thank you for all that.

PM: Thanks, too, for inspiring me to break my ukulele out of its case. I bought one a long time ago, and I just never got around to it with all the other instruments in the house. But I've been playing it the last few days, and it's really a gas.

JS: Yeah. Oh, that's excellent.

PM: But you really need to listen to somebody great and to watch somebody great and see some of the possibilities. If a kid had an electric guitar and he never really played it much, and then he saw *Woodstock* and he saw Hendrix and he went, "Oh, I get it!"

[laughter]

PM: It's like that!

JS: Oh, yeah. It's such a fun instrument. And that's the great thing about the ukulele, it doesn't matter what level you're at, it's always fun. It just makes you smile. It just has that effect.

PM: Sure, even if you're just strumming a couple of pretty chords and singing a song, it sounds perfect. Yeah, you don't have to be like killing it, or even trying; strummed or picked, it just sounds gorgeous. And I guess one of the reasons that your playing seems to have that jaw-dropping effect on people is because of the instrument itself, the diminutive nature of the instrument. It doesn't look like something that's going to knock you on your keister until this young cat, Jake Shimabukuro, gets up there and shows you how it can happen.

JS: [laughs]

PM: Now, you're a Hawaiian born, Japanese American musician, is that correct, all those in a row?

JS: Yeah. Hawaiian born, yeah, Japanese American, yes.

PM: That's a mouthful, right? I mean, does the combination of all those things mean a great deal to you?

JS: Yes. And it's actually--being born and raised in Hawaii is just very different because the majority of the population that's in Hawaii are Asians, right? And I think unlike any place else in the United States. With my Japanese heritage, it was great for me to grow up in a place like Hawaii because that's my own culture: even though I'm an American I was raised in the Japanese culture, and observe the practices that we have, especially festivals. Just recently I've been going over to Japan a lot to tour and perform and stuff like that. And it wasn't much of a culture shock for me except to see how many people live there, especially in the centers like Tokyo, that was a bit overwhelming. But as far as just from a cultural standpoint, it felt very familiar to me.

PM: As well traveled a person as I may be, I've not yet had the pleasure of going either to Japan or Hawaii. And yet it seems to me that the natures of those two peoples are quite different. And so first of all, is that true to you? And secondly, do you feel more Japanese by nature or more Hawaiian? I would say probably more Japanese, right? That's your blood, that's more your essence, right?

JS: Well, the thing about Hawaii is that we have our own culture, too. It was a monarchy at one point, and it had its own language, and they even have their own traditional Hawaiian foods, and its own music and all of that. And I grew up with all of that stuff, too, so that feels very comforting to me, and very familiar to me as well. And I guess, I don't know, a large part of me also feels very comfortable with my Japanese side. But then on the other hand the Japanese culture--or I should say that the Asian cultures are very well, I guess, adapted into local Hawaiian culture, or modern local Hawaiian culture. Chinese New Years, and all of that, is a big part of Hawaii now.

PM: Wow.

JS: We celebrate all of these things. So it's really just wonderful to see all of the influences and traditions blending together in local Hawaiian culture.

PM: That's really very interesting, how global an upbringing your life has been. How would you describe the atmosphere of the actual home you grew up in, musically, or otherwise?

JS: Well, we lived in a two-bedroom apartment. My parents loved music, so there would always be music playing in the living room. My mom and dad both collected music and had a pretty large collection of vinyl records. Yeah, definitely there always stuff playing. I remember listening to albums like the Byrds.

PM: Oh, wow.

JS: The Cars. And then things like Air Supply and Olivia Newton John.

[laughter]

JS: So there was a lot of different things. And then of course we had a lot of Hawaiian music going on. My all-time favorite traditional Hawaiian band was called the Sunday Manoa; they were really great. I grew up with their music. I've always loved traditional Hawaiian music.

PM: And it's something that people on the mainland don't really know much about. I think we really missed something beautiful there; Hawaiian music is really a rich treasury.

JS: Yeah, there's just something really magical about that music. Often it's not the most complex music, compared to some other forms of music, like Bach or Bop. But I think

the beauty of Hawaiian music really lies in its simplicity and just something about the feel; there's a certain kind of groove in Hawaiian music. I guess it's something similar like jazz, and playing swing or something, or like a blues shuffle. There's a certain kind of a feel or a groove that's hard to mimic or replicate if you don't grow up around it.

PM: Right.

JS: Hawaiian music has that same kind of thing. When you listen to traditional Hawaiian music, whoever is strumming their instrument or playing that rhythm, there's a certain way that they groove that is just strong, and it's really special. You can feel it. It has a lot to do with that whole island, or having the year-round summer, and the gorgeous weather, and all of that.

PM: No doubt. Now, have you, over your lifetime, played various size ukuleles, or do you stick with the concert?

JS: Well, actually now I play a tenor. But yeah, when I was younger, I started out with a standard size, which is the smallest. When I got older, I went to the concert size, and I liked the concert size a lot. And then finally when I was in high school I switched over to the tenor. And there's another size, there's a one larger than the tenor, called the baritone.

PM: That's the one I have.

JS: Oh, really?

PM: Yeah. I interviewed this artist named Amy Correia who used a baritone uke, and I loved the sound of it. And so I found a Harmony from the '60s on eBay, and it was beautiful, and it sounds great.

JS: Oh, perfect. The baritone is the only one of the four that is tuned actually like the four strings on the guitar.

PM: Right. So that was appealing to a guitar player as well.

JS: Yeah, if you're a guitar player, a baritone is a good choice, everything kind of makes sense. You don't have the fifth and the sixth string.

PM: Right. But if you're a fingerstyle guitar player, and the fifth and the sixth string is the whole business of your thumb, then all of a sudden you go, yeah, but what am I doing with my thumb now?

[laughter]

JS: Yeah. But it's a great sound.

PM: But you don't mess with the baritone much yourself, right? It's not for the gig you like to do?

JS: Yeah. I like the traditional tuning with the high first string.

PM: Ah.

JS: And the reason I like that is because of the voicings I can get. You know, because the first string and the fourth string are only a whole step apart, you can play chords and get some really close voicings. To get those voicings on the baritone tuning, you'd have to make really wide stretches.

PM: I see. See, I didn't understand that. I thought that they were just tuned relatively like each other. But they're not.

JS: But when you play the tenor, because of that high string, a lot of clusters are possible like a piano player, where you can play notes right next to each other to produce that tension.

PM: Oh, I'm getting another ukulele. I got to figure out what you're talking about, that sounds great.

JS: And all those big chords, without huge stretches.

PM: Wow. So similarly, do you always use the ukulele you play in standard tuning? You never like go to some alternate tuning or anything like that, right?

JS: Yeah. There was a time maybe about 10 years ago where I was experimenting with alternate tunings, and in fact I have recorded two songs that use an alternate tuning. But the funny thing is after a while I got so lazy about retuning it on stage that I just learned the song in standard tuning.

[laughter]

JS: And playing in standard tuning is better for people who want to learn from what you're doing. And it can be seen as a kind of cheap or easy way to get your instrument to sound different, if you follow.

PM: Right.

JS: So I like the challenge of forcing my hands to make the changes to make the songs different.

PM: Absolutely. I mean, if I play something tricky that I know somebody else doesn't know how to do in first position, their natural inclination will be to say, "Wow, what

tuning is that?" I say, "Well, it's standard tuning, dude." They go, "Oh, really? Show me how you're doing that."

JS: "I need to go home and practice it."

[laughter]

PM: On "Sakura," off the *Gently Weeps* CD, how did you get the ukulele to sound so much like a Japanese koto?

JS: Oh, yeah--when I was working on that arrangement I was really trying to find these weird voicings for the different chords, and where I was going to play the melody, like on what string, and where I'm going to pluck it, you know, like closer to the bridge, or if I'm going to do more of a light stroke with my index, or use a really harsh down stroke, ta-dum! with my thumb. Like all of those things, I put a lot of thought into that, because it's subtle, but when you put it all together it changes the character of the instrument a little bit. It's almost like, hmm, it's not like a ukulele, so it's a little different now. And that was the whole idea of that song was to get a completely different vibe out of the instrument. That was a lot of fun. I really enjoyed working on that.

PM: It's really interesting. I've heard a great guitar player named Steve Kimock get that koto sound--

JS: Oh, yeah!

PM: Do you know him?

JS: Yeah! He's like one of my all-time heroes! I love him!

PM: Oh, really? Because I played with him for many years.

JS: Really?

PM: And I sent him an email because I don't know if you know, he loves the ukulele?

JS: Yeah!

PM: Have you guys like corresponded about the ukulele?

JS: I met him at the High Sierra Music Festival.

PM: Crazy! Because I sent him an email and I said, "Hey, I'm going to talk to Jake Shimabukuro. Do you have any questions for him?" But Kimock, he never looks at his email--he'll probably see it in about two weeks.

[laughter]

JS: Oh, wow, that's incredible. Oh, I love his playing. When he was playing at the High Sierra Music Festival, I mean, I was sneaking away and trying to get to every one of his performances and workshops. It was the first year that I played there, so I had a couple other things going on. I did a thing with the Flecktones--

PM: Oh, wow.

JS: And I had a couple of solo spots and then a workshop. He did a workshop, and I was there, I was front row.

PM: Was it one of those wild workshops he does about true tuning and whole tunes and all that highbrow theoretical stuff?

JS: No. What I love about his approach and his philosophy, it goes beyond just his own work as an artist. I mean, it's just about everything! Like his playing encompasses everything. I just love his style.

PM: And he was like that when we first met him. He was in his early 20s. And my brother and I, we say we found him in this basement in Bethlehem, Pennsylvania. He was there practicing like 18 hours a day. And people would come and push food under the door and just hear a "Go away!" from the inside. [laughs] And he would do crazy things, like he wouldn't turn the reverb on until the sun went down. [laughs]

JS: That is amazing. But you know what? That makes total sense to me. Up until about two years ago, I had so many different effects pedals, I was always experimenting with different kinds of sounds and different kinds of patterns and things like that, and I was really into that at one point. But a few years ago I realized how dependent I became on those effects.

I realized it because I was touring somewhere that I remember there was a band playing, and I had my ukulele with me because I didn't want to leave it in the car, but I left my pedal board in the car. That thing weighs a ton, and I wasn't about to bring it to the workshop. And then there was a band that was playing, and the guitar player knew that I was in town, and he wanted me to come up and play. So he asked me come and sit in on a tune. And I remember feeling like I don't know if I can because I left my pedal board in the car. And that feeling really freaked me out, because I was like, hey, wait, I'm not a pedal board player, I'm a ukulele player. I have to be able to play and sit in and do whatever I need to do without my pedal board, because otherwise I had become like--it's like I play two instruments. So that really scared me. And then after that moment I just said, "You know what, it's just a habit," and I broke it.

PM: Wow. I managed sales for them for many years, and I noticed a picture of you with a Mesa Boogie in a room. Is that an amp you like?

JS: Oh, yeah. Well, I used to play through tube amps. The first amp I really got attached to was the Mesa Boogie Blue Angel.

PM: One of the nicest things they ever did, the Blue Angel.

JS: Yeah. I mean, that thing just sounded great. And then I got more familiar with like the Marshall sound, which I loved, too.

PM: Sure.

JS: And then the last amp I started using was an amp made by a company called Carr. They make really nice stuff, too. That was a few years ago. Finally I said, "Okay, that's it. It's just me and the ukulele." [laughs]

PM: That's beautiful, because all of my favorite stuff of yours that I heard was just the really pure tone, just the string and just your fingers. That's where it's really at.

Tell us something about your brother, Bruce. What is he up to, and what does he do?

JS: Well, my brother, he does everything. And that's the scary part about him, is he's good at everything. Like at one point he got into video editing, and he was great at that. And then growing up he was great at every sport, basketball, football, baseball, and then billiards or throwing darts, he's a fast runner, he's a great swimmer, he's a good surfer.

PM: Damn!

JS: Recently he's been doing things like editing film and stuff like that. [laughs] I mean, anything he wants to do he excels at it. So even music, when we were growing up, ukulele, yeah, he was a really good ukulele player. And he gets bored easily, and so then he wants to move on and do other things. So he actually stopped playing ukulele for a long time. And then maybe about five years ago he just wanted to pick it up again. And he started playing the ukulele, and he just got together with friends and they would do like performances around town, just little things here and there. And then about a year ago he--I used to have this old guitar just sitting around my house because I don't really know what to do with it because I don't know how to play the guitar. So he started picking it up. He started with a few chords, and he started playing. And then all of a sudden he started singing and then writing songs. And he just loved it. I caught him listening to a Bob Dylan record--

PM: [laughs]

JS: Every time I come home from a trip, he's into something new. And right now he's been playing the guitar and he's trying to write songs and things like that. We've been playing a little bit together now. So it's been great, because of course, he's my best friend. Whenever we spend time together it's always been like, oh, just hanging out. But now it's

kind of like, yeah, we can still hang out and stuff, but we also enjoy playing music together.

PM: Wow, what a neat relationship you have. Tell me, please, about *Hula Girl*, the movie, and your soundtrack experience. How did that happen?

JS: Oh, yeah, that was last year. The producer of the movie, I guess she liked my music. It's a Japanese film. And I was touring pretty heavily in Japan. So she contacted our publishing company and asked how they could get in touch with me and see if I would be willing to do some music for their film. And at first I think their idea was just for me to accompany some video, to do a couple of tunes. And then after we talked about it, they asked "Well, would you be willing to record the whole soundtrack?"

PM: Wow!

JS: And a big part of me, of course, wanted do it, but the other side was like, well, I don't really know how to that.

[laughter]

JS: So it was a great process, and I learned so much through that experience because it was the first time that I actually had to sit there and write out piano parts.

PM: Really?

JS: I had to write out like little things for a string quartet, and things like that. And it was really great to be able to sit in front of the computer--I mean, they have all these software programs, you just go in there and you just input the notes. And I was using the ukulele to help me a lot, because I was finding melodies, and then I'd punch them in for the piano melody. And then I'd fill in with the left hand after that.

PM: Wow. So did you grow up as a music reader, or learn more by ear?

JS: Well, kind of both. It was more by ear when I was growing up. But then when I was in high school--like from intermediate school on I played in the high school band. I played in my intermediate school band and in my high school band. So I did learn how to read. I mean, I'm not like a classical musician where you can just throw something in front of me and I can just play it.

PM: Sight reading, yeah.

JS: But I can notate music, and I can read it for--I mean, I have to practice, but then I can read.

PM: Right. So when you were composing for the film, were you doing it to video, like were you watching the screen and then composing to what you were looking at?

JS: Yeah. Everything has to be done according to what was happening on the screen. So I made these tempo maps. And actually what really helped me a lot is about a month before I got this offer--and this is really cool, it was such a coincidence--and I believe that everything happens for a reason--

PM: Sure.

JS: --but a month before I got asked to do this film, at the time I was touring with Jimmy Buffett, and Jimmy did this movie project called *Hoot*. He was producing the movie and all that. And the Coral Reefer Band, they kind of put together the soundtrack. And since I was touring with him he asked me to come in and play on the soundtrack, and record little things here and there.

PM: Right.

JS: So when I got there, just being able to see how they went about recording the music and how they charted things out, that helped me a lot when I was doing the *Hula Girl*.

PM: Wow. What a good coincidence.

JS: Yeah. And then I learned a little bit about how to make a tempo map and how to play everything as you're watching the video so you make everything kind of match up.

PM: Right, time code everything.

JS: Yeah. So that was a really good little foot in the door before doing it on my own. But I really hope that I can get more opportunities to do that because I want to learn more about that and get more experience in that field.

PM: Is *Hula Girl* easy for U.S. audiences to see? How do we see this film?

JS: Well, it did come down for a lot of the film festivals, even national film festivals. I know it played a lot on the West Coast, like in Seattle, played in California.

PM: Right, all the surfing places.

JS: Yeah.

[laughter]

JS: And they also released it on DVD.

PM: Oh, that's how you get it. Okay.

JS: Of course when it played here in Hawaii, everyone loved it. And it's a true story.

PM: Right. So it was huge there, right.

Along those lines, Jake, give me an idea how big a deal the ukulele is--and I don't say it right, I hear you say OOkooLAYlay, right?

JS: Yes.

PM: How big is the ukulele as an instrument in Hawaii, where it originated? And what's the image of the instrument of the instrument there?

JS: Well, it's pretty huge here. I believe that on the Mainland in grade school, you learn the recorder, that's the first instrument you learn, right?

PM: Right, I think is still is, yeah. [I went to Catholic school--we sang...]

JS: In Hawaii, I think it's mandatory that all the students have to learn the ukulele. We all have like a one-month course in strumming basic chords on the uke. So everyone is familiar with that. And when I was growing up, everyone had one in their house. [laughs]

PM: Wow!

JS: Of course, it may have been collecting dust, but everyone had one.

PM: Amazing.

JS: And it's strange, because I mean when I first started playing I was doing a lot of traditional Hawaiian music, and I was also just trying to mimic other ukulele players that played before me. One of my all-time favorites is a man by the name of Eddie Kamae. He's noted as the first ukulele virtuoso, many decades ago. But he was really the one who stood out to me because he approached the instrument a little bit differently. He was still just a great traditional player, but then he also started playing other things that didn't sound so traditional to anyone. And he inspired a whole bunch of great players, people like Ohta-San, and Peter Moon and all these other great ukulele players that came after him. But Eddie Kamae is still alive. [He has become a maker of documentary films--read about that here: <http://www.mauinews.com/story.aspx?id=22100>] But because of him I realized that there's no limit to what the ukulele can do, and it's really just up to the player what you want to do with it. And then I realized it has all the same notes as any other instrument, any other westernized instrument, except it doesn't have the same range--except when you're playing a melody you can always bring it down an octave or raise it up an octave, whatever you need to do to make it work.

So that's what I did. I can play any song, there are things that make it work for my instrument. And that's what I did. I just opened up my mind to anything, anything that I heard on the radio or on a CD. I would just sit there and work through any song and make

it sound authentic enough, and just... because of course you can play any song on the ukulele, but you don't want to make it sound easy, like you want it to sound--

PM: You want it to rock--

JS: [laughs] Yeah.

PM: --in whatever style you're in.

JS: You have to be true to--I guess, make it have at least the feeling of it.

PM: And I'm sure anybody can see that you're taking ukulele places that it not only has never been but might never have gone. [laughs]

And on top of just being a virtuoso guy, how amazing it is to be such a recognized ambassador between Japan and Hawaii at such a young age. What is that responsibility like, and how does that make you feel?

JS: Well, it was an honor, being approached to be an ambassador, to work with them and do that. I feel very good about it, because, first of all, I love Hawaii. I love our island. And just going around and I guess bragging to people about where I grew up and stuff like that, [laughs] it's just an honor to do that, I mean, because I think Hawaii really is a special place. And especially since I travel a lot now, I realize that there is no other place in the world like Hawaii. And I see a lot of killer places, and of course, I mean, every place has something wonderful and interesting to offer. But one of the cool things about Hawaii, aside from the weather and our multi-cultural lifestyle there, which is another great aspect, but there's also the people, their spirit and their attitude, what we call the "aloha spirit."

Right now I'm actually on the island of Molokai. I live in Honolulu, but I came out to Molokai because yesterday I did a few workshops for some of the high schools and the grammar schools here. So I came down just to do that. And my grandmother also lives here, so I decided to stay a few extra days and hang out with her. But when we're on this island, on the island of Molokai, time just stops. There's not a traffic light. There are no traffic lights here. No malls. There's only one little town where everyone goes and gets their groceries, where everyone on the Molokai gets their groceries. The population on this island is only 7,000.

PM: [laughs]

JS: And I mean, all there is to do here is go fishing or maybe do some hunting if you're into that. We have a lot of deer up here. Actually, tonight is a special benefit, we're eating deer tonight for dinner. I'm totally stoked. I can't even get cell phone reception up here. That's why I couldn't call you from my cell phone, I had to call you from my grandma's land line. But yeah, so it's great. I mean, every time the wind blows the cable goes out.

[laughter]

JS: But I mean, this is what I love. I love coming here, it's just great, especially after a long tour. Honolulu is kind of like a big city now, it's really developed into that. But it's still gorgeous. It's still beautiful, I still love it there. It's just different. Every island is different. I mean, that's the beauty of Hawaii; you come here and you can go to all six of the islands and just have a completely different experience.

PM: Wow. I can't wait to check that out someday.

Are you considering an album of duets with various string giants, is that in your future?

JS: I was just discussing that idea with a friend recently.

PM: You should do one with Kimock!

JS: Oh, my gosh, I would love to play with him!

[laughter]

[At this point Jake went very deep again into his somewhat unique appreciation of Kimock's style and groove.]

PM: Wow. You're such an enlightened and generous musician, you'll go right into talking about another guy in your interview, when anybody else would bring the conversation back to themselves. Your nature is really amazing to me. But I do hope you do that duets record. I agree with your friend, I think that's an important idea for you next.

JS: Oh, I would love to do it. Of course I would love to do an album like that, but I just wouldn't even know how to approach it. I mean, definitely Steve Kimock would be the first guy on my list. I would love to ask him.

PM: Well, one easy way to do it would be to pick the guys, or the women, and to say, "You pick the song and tell me what it is, and then let's talk about how to do it." And so then the repertoire is decided upon without you having to do it. They each bring a tune to the table, and then you don't have to think about that. But now in each person's direction I'll think about, okay, now, how do we approach this piece of music. But I really think that could be the next huge step for you getting to the next plateau.

Well, I've taken a lot of your time already, Jake. I'm very happy to speak to you today. And you've been very generous with your time.

JS: Well, thank you, Frank. What a small world, that you and Steve are the oldest of friends.

PM: Yeah. I talk to the most amazing people and sometimes his name will come up and they say, "Oh, him!"

[laughter]

PM: And I'm sure when he finally sees my email he may say, "Damn, you spoke to Jake? There are 21 things I wanted you to ask him!"

It's fantastic to meet you, Jake. And I look forward to meeting you in person, and hopefully seeing you play sometime soon.

JS: All right, Frank. Sounds great. Thank you very much. Hey, happy holidays to you. Merry Christmas and Happy New Year, and all that stuff.

