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Restoration of 1937-1938 Anthony Cox Kokolele



Completed by Ron Cook

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For Charlie Wingo

Background

When Jonah Kumalae made a decision to set up a booth at the 1915 Panama Pacific International Exposition in San Francisco, he showcased his finely crafted ukuleles with Hawaiian musicians brought over to play them and won a "Gold Award" for his instruments at the event. This started the incredible popularity of the ukulele for the next several decades. Even though the ukulele had been around since the 1800s (it was originally a small Portuguese instrument), it was Kumalae's success that triggered its popularity throughout the United States. In the 1920s, many Hawaiian makers were crafting thousands of ukuleles each year, and U.S. companies like Martin Guitars and Gibson jumped on the bandwagon to produce thousands more.

Anthony Cox came late into the ukulele business. A 1920 United States Federal Census shows an Anthony Cox born in Lahaina, Maui, in 1910. In February of 1937 Cox applied for a patent for his double cocoanut shell ukulele. (Patent No. 2,098,701.) It was granted in November of that same year. In the patent application Cox says, "It is therefore the principle object of my invention to produce a ukelele having fine tone, and I accomplish this by constructing a substantial portion of the main body of the ukelele from cocoanut shells."

Charlie's Anthony Cox "Kokolele" is obviously one of the earliest, made in the months before the patent was granted. Also, I believe Kokolele was changed later to Cocolele, which is how most musical instrument historians and auction web sites spell it, such as this label description on another Cox ukulele I came across on the internet:

Sound hole label reads: "Cox Brothers
Cocolele & Curio Mfgs. Patent
No.2,098,701 Patent Date Nov. 9, 1938
711 Kaiwiuia St. Honolulu, T.H."



Charlie's Anthony Cox ukulele has two very simple labels, the largest reading "Patent Applied For, Made by Anthony Cox." The smaller just says "Cox Kokolele."

Notice in the label description above that it mentions a company name, "Cox Brothers Cocolele & Curio Mfgs". Evidently, a brother came later into the business, which branched out into "Curios". I haven't found any information on Cox Brother's "Curios", but that sounds as if they were making items for the tourist trade in Honolulu. However, the Kokolele/Cocolele didn't last very long. Cox, as did nearly all Hawaiian ukulele makers, stopped all production because of World War II. After the war, the uke's popularity would not return for 40 years.

On the following pages is a copy of the of the Anthony Cox cocoanut ukulele patent.

Nov. 9, 1937.

A. G. COX

2,098,701

UKELELE

Filed Feb. 13, 1937

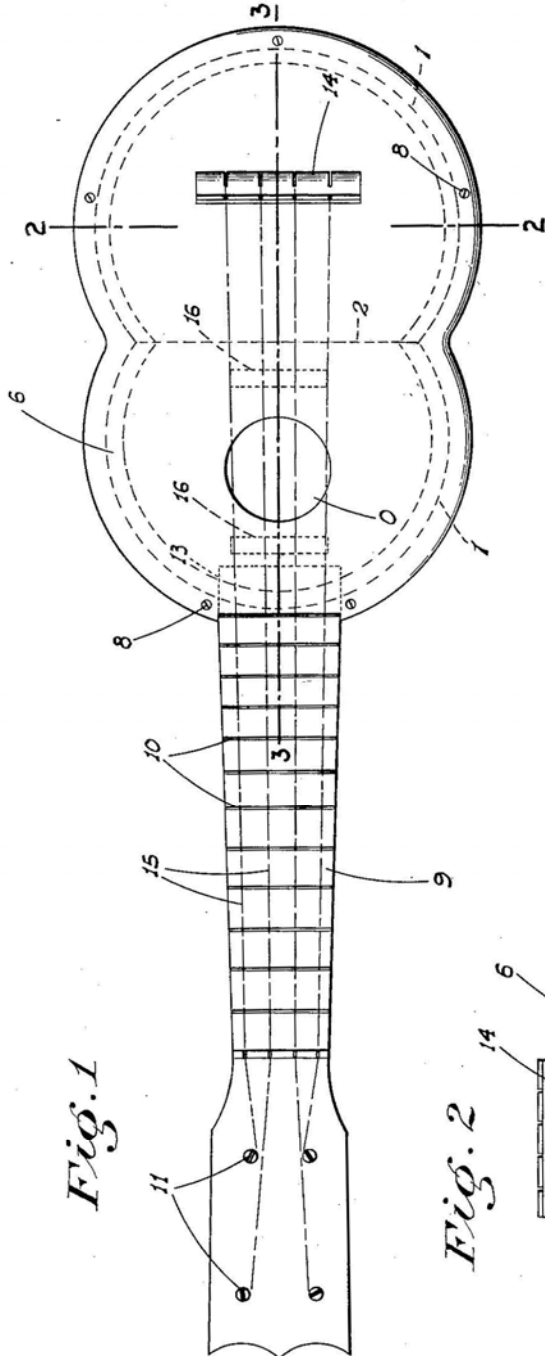


Fig. 1

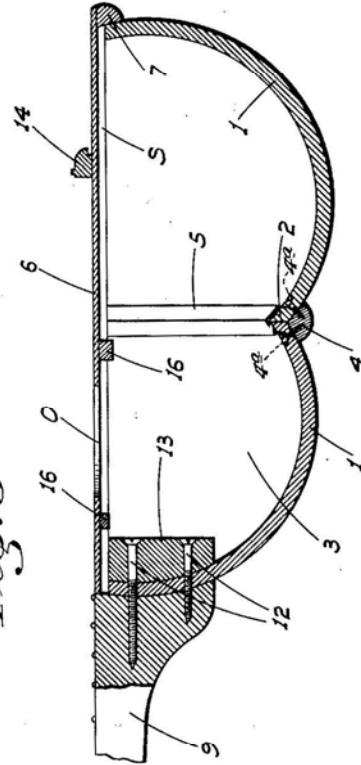


Fig. 3

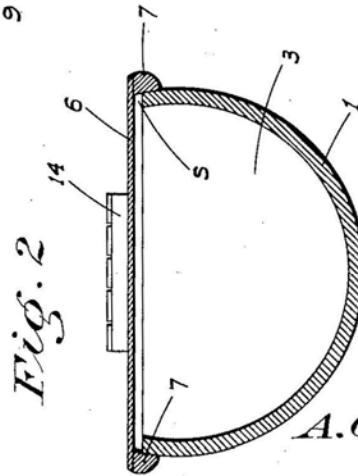


Fig. 2

INVENTOR
A. G. COX

BY *Raymond E. White*
ATTORNEY

UNITED STATES PATENT OFFICE

2,098,701

UKELELE

Anthony G. Cox, Honolulu, Territory of Hawaii

Application February 13, 1937, Serial No. 125,580

2 Claims. (Cl. 84—291)

This invention relates generally to an improved structure for a ukelele and in particular relates to a ukelele the main body of which is constructed from cocoanut shells.

5 Heretofore ukeleles have been made of mahogany, ohia, monkey-pod or redwood and, in spite of the exhaustive efforts made, fine tonal qualities have not been obtained.

10 It is therefore the principal object of my invention to produce a ukelele having a fine tone, and I accomplish this by constructing a substantial portion of the main body of the ukelele from cocoanut shells. As the cocoanut shells are exceedingly hard with good resonant quality, the tone of a ukelele constructed in part therefrom is excellent.

15 Another object of my invention is to polish the exterior surface of the cocoanut shells used in the ukelele whereby the same will be very attractive enhancing the value of the instrument.

20 A further object of the invention is to produce a simple and inexpensive instrument and yet one which will be exceedingly effective for the purpose for which it is designed.

25 These objects I accomplish by means of such structure and relative arrangement of parts as will fully appear by a perusal of the following specification and claims.

In the drawing similar characters of reference

30 indicate corresponding parts in the several views: Figure 1 is a top plan of my improved ukelele. Figure 2 is a sectional view on line 2—2 of Fig. 1.

35 Figure 3 is a sectional view on line 3—3 of Fig. 1.

Referring now more particularly to the characters of reference on the drawing, the instrument consists of a pair of half cocoanut shells 1 disposed in side by side relation and adjacent portions of which are cut away to afford an edge to edge contact, as at 2, and to form an enclosed sound box or chamber 3 of substantially semi-circular form in cross section. At the line of engagement 2, the shells are secured together on the exterior by a wooden connecting bead 4 held in place by glue, and small screws 4a if desired. Interiorly of the shells, a felt strip 5 is glued over the line of engagement 2. The shells 1 are smoothed inside and are highly polished on the exterior.

50 A mahogany top plate or sounding board 6, cut in plan to conform to the top edge curvature of the cocoanut shells, is mounted on and above the shells by means of a wooden bead 7 secured to the exterior of the shells and projecting approxi-

mately $\frac{1}{8}$ inch above the upper edge thereof. The top plate is secured only to the bead and is spaced, as at 8, from the upper edge of the shells the distance the bead projects above said edge. The bead 7 is connected to the shells and top plate by glue, small screws 8 being used to further secure the plate 6 to the bead.

A neck 9, of usual construction and having frets 10 and keys 11, is secured to one of the shells adjacent the upper edge and at the end opposite the line of engagement 2 by means of screws 12 which first pass through a mahogany reinforcing block 13, and then project through holes in the shell and into the neck 9. The plate is cut with the usual sound opening O and is likewise provided with the usual bridge 14 to receive the strings 15. Mahogany strips 16 are glued to the inner face of plate 6 to strengthen the same and prevent splitting and the like.

A ukelele constructed as above described not only has a fine tone but is very attractive in appearance. The success in producing a ukelele having a fine tone resides particularly in the use of the exceedingly hard shells and the provision of a space S between the hard shell and mahogany top plate, the connection being made with a wooden bead 7. In practice, the ukelele may be made of one, two (as shown), or three shells as desired, the desired tone being obtained as long as the space S is left between the top plate and shells.

By providing space S and securing the top plate or sounding board to the shells by means of wooden bead 7 at a point outwardly of the shells, the vibratory characteristics of the sound board in the marginal portions thereof above the upper edges of the shells 1 are not damped about said portions as would occur if said sounding board were secured directly against the relatively hard shells.

From the foregoing description it will be readily seen that I have produced such an instrument as substantially fulfills the objects of the invention as set forth herein.

45 While this specification sets forth in detail the present and preferred construction of the instrument, still in practice such deviations from such detail may be resorted to as do not form a departure from the spirit of the invention, as defined by the appended claims.

50 Having thus described my invention, what I claim as new and useful and desire to secure by Letters Patent is:

1. In a ukelele, a main open top body comprising a pair of half cocoanut shells a portion of each

2

2,098,701

of which is cut away, the shells abutting and secured together along the lines of cut and forming a sound chamber, a top plate; and means mounting the top plate on the body but spaced some distance from the upper edge of the body.

2. In a ukelele, a main open top body comprising a plurality of half cocoanut shells, a portion

of each of which is cut away, the shells abutting and secured together along the lines of cut and forming a sound chamber, a top plate and means mounting the top plate on the shells and over the sound chamber.

ANTHONY G. COX.

Valuation

As I mentioned before, Hawaiian ukulele production stopped because of World War II. After the war some production resumed to supply local tourist demand, but the ukulele quietly faded from the domestic scene. The popularity of big bands, and later, rock and roll, made everyone more interested in guitars, bass, and drums. But now, especially since the 1990s and the turn of the 21st century, the ukulele has once again become a very popular instrument. Ukulele clubs have formed throughout the United States, Canada, Europe, Australia, and the Far East.

Ukuleles are being produced not only in Hawaii again, but throughout the United States, Japan, and, where tens of thousands are being made, China. Prices now range from less than \$40 (Chinese made), to custom instruments costing several thousand dollars.

Old ukuleles are again in demand and sell quite often on online auction sites for as little as \$20 (poor condition) to \$500 to several thousand (for collectables like some Hawaiian ukes and those by Martin and Gibson).

Anthony Cox ukuleles are few and far between. Not many were made since the company probably only lasted three or four years (1937-1940?). This rarity does make these ukes a little more valuable to collectors. For instance, a Cox Brothers "Cocolele" was recently listed on Ebay for \$575.

Charlie's "Kokolele", is perhaps one of the earliest. As such it could be worth well over the price the "Cocolele" in the Ebay listing went for.

Day 1: Assessment



On Day 1, I made a full investigation and assessment of damages. Most ukuleles are known for having almost paper-thin woods, but this Anthony Cox ukulele is much different. The coconut shells are fairly thick, nearly $\frac{1}{4}$ inch thick in places, and the top is a little thicker than other ukes. The top is also rimmed with a $\frac{1}{4}$ inch koa edging that drapes over the side. The top had one very large crack running the entire length of the top and right through the edging. At least half of the top had separated from the body.

The coconut body was in good shape (no cracks or splits), as were the neck and head. The head had one missing tuning peg.

One thing I always notice with older ukuleles is that the neck's width has shrunk a little exposing the sharp ends of the frets. I'll have to file the ends down later in the restoration. The head decal was clear and unscratched. It only needed a little cleaning.

Day 2: Top Removal



On Day 2, I removed the tuning pegs and began the process of top removal. As I mentioned, the top had an area where the glue failed, I intended to apply a little hot water around that area to soften up the surrounding hide glue, but I noticed another area where the glue was failing. All I needed to do was tap the underside of the edging, and the whole top popped off. It was probably the easiest top or back removal I've done.

Having the body open makes it easier for me to repair the top cracks and apply any necessary reinforcement.

Day 3: Top Crack Repair & Head Discovery



On this day I fixed the top crack. Since this wasn't a shrinkage crack, it only took some side clamping and a little weight on top to keep it from bowing. A few miniature clamps kept the crack repair even.

While the glue dried, I took a closer look at the peg head. When I started to remove the three tuning pegs I noticed they didn't seem to fit the holes in the head very well. They moved around in the holes like they were too small. After removing them I glanced at the holes and noticed they were tapered. This ukulele originally had friction-style pegs, like violin pegs.

At this time I was also restoring a 1915-1920 Kumalae ukulele. It also has friction pegs. I took one and slipped it in the Kokolele's head. It was too big, but the taper was perfect. I decided I'd have to make new pegs.

Day 4: Adding Cleats



Now that the crack was glued, I added thin cleats on the underside of the top to strengthen the areas under the cracks. I did notice when I started adding the cleats that there was another short hairline crack that had formed on the opposite side. I used a little thin CA-type wood glue (instant glue) and let it wick into the crack, sealing it. Four thin cleats on the underside helped protect the crack from reappearing.

Day 5: Gluing Broken Top Edge Piece



At the area where the neck joins the top, a piece of the edging had broken off. This was a simple fix, since it was a single piece, not pieces, that came off.

Day 6: Gluing Top to Coconut Body



Today it was time to glue the top back on to the coconut shell body. After scraping and removing most of the old hide glue, I reapplied glue to the coconut shells and clamped the top back on.

Because of the rounded shape of the coconut shells, it took a little thought on how to clamp the top down. I used pieces of maple to span the length and width of the uke so singles clamp on each coconut body and on the neck were enough to do the job.

Day 7: Busy Day



This day I took care of several things. I first filed down the sharp ends of the frets so the neck edge was smooth again. The back of the neck had a few gouges in it close to the peg head, so I scraped this down and sanded it smooth.

I needed to sand the top because of glue squeeze-out and a little unevenness at the crack repair. I went to several grades of sandpaper, from 100 grit to 600 grit, and then cleaned it off with an air spray and tack cloth.

A little later in the day I used a cherry stain to touch up all the koa top and neck. Cherry stain on koa makes the uke look as it should. It gives the koa a beautiful brownish-red appearance.

Days 8 & 9: Varnishing



I waited a few days after applying the cherry stain to let it dry and cure. Then for the next two days I applied a few coats of low-gloss tung oil varnish. It seems that all the ukuleles I've restored have matte finishes. I've seen newer ones with high-gloss finishes like those on guitars, but these older ukes do not. A low-gloss tung oil varnish replicates the appearance of the old-style ukes.

Day 10: New Tuning Pegs



While the tung oil varnish was curing, I made the new friction-style tuning pegs. I first turned four small maple blanks into small, ukulele size pegs, then used a peg sharpener (like a pencil sharpener) to give the pegs the proper taper.

I then shaped the peg heads on the spindle sander, carved them a little with my rotary carving tool, then sanded them. I stained them black to give the appearance of ebony pegs.

Day 11: Polishing and Stringing



A few days later, after the varnish had dried fully, I added a little extra protection with a non-abrasive paste wax. I applied it using very fine 0000 steel wool soaked in the wax. Using steel wool instead of a cloth keeps the original matte look and doesn't polish the uke to a high gloss.

Once polished, it was ready to string up. However...

The neck didn't come back on an even plane with the body. The strings buzzed on the upper frets. To fix this, I added a small nut on the bridge to raise the action enough so no buzzing occurred any more.

Day 11 (Continued): Completion



After stringing the ukulele, I tried it out with the only ukulele song I know, “Has Anybody Seen My Gal.” It sounded lovely.

Fully restored, this lovely and unique Anthony Cox “Kokolele” will be fun to play and a pleasure to display. It’s over 75 years old, and can now easily last another 75 years.
