

inside info

page 20

Behind closed doors

Ukelele 101: Beginners play Dylan on a Wednesday night at city cafe The Little Mule.



Learning just for fun - whether it's hair-braiding, beekeeping or how to stay calm - is popular right now. Felicity Lewis applied herself in three classes.

Beginners' ukes via Bob Dylan

School Laneway Learning.
Venue City cafe The Little Mule.
Teacher Harry Harrison, schoolteacher and member of the Melbourne Ukelele Collective.
Cost \$12.
Time 75 minutes.
The sell Learn to channel "His Bobness", how to hold and strum a ukelele, the instrument's basic history and why it is more than a small guitar.
Bring A ukelele (\$29 at music shops).
Class The 16 students include guitarist Arjun, 12, who wants to diversify; Matt, who finds the class "really useful" for polishing his skills; Martine, with an upscale uke - "it's the first time I've picked it up, it's way beyond my capabilities".

What happens? How many times can a novice turn a tuning knob on her ukelele before she realises that it is not the one attached to the string she is trying to tune? Many times, it turns out, as my new uke wobbles in and out of tune while we apply our Calypso strums to *Blowin' in the Wind*. Luckily, our teacher, Harry, has counselled us on the power of gentle persistence. The other two Dylan songs to conquer are *Don't Think Twice (It's All Right)* and, perhaps less auspiciously, *You Ain't Goin' Nowhere*. We digress for some history. Did you know that ukelele is Hawaiian for "jumping flea"? Islanders had mastered the uke long before Tiny Tim got hold of one. To show the instrument's versatility, Harry treats us to an impressive performance of the delicate tune *Blue Roses*

Falling, written by a ukelele master in honour of a friend's dying grandmother. No janga-jang there.
Quote: "Don't be scared of a bit of music theory; it's really very interesting."
Question for teacher: Why Bob?
"Dylan writes songs everybody can sing."
Qualification: Party entertainer.

How To Have Better Conversations

School School of Life.
Cost \$50.
Time Three hours.
Teacher Sofija Stefanovic, writer and filmmaker whose research has included entering the Miss Ex-Yugoslavia beauty pageant.
The sell The School of Life is an Antipodean

offshoot of the popular London school started by author Alain de Botton (*How Proust Can Change Your Life, How To Think More About Sex*). This topic offers a way past chit-chat to chats that inspire us. How should we talk to lovers? How do we approach difficult conversations?
Bring When we enrol, we are asked to think of a conversation that has changed our lives and why.
Venue The HQ of School of Life organisers, the social enterprise group Small Giants.
Class The 24 "students" range in age from their 20s to 60s and include a doctor, a film editor, an artist, an animator and an aid worker.
What happens? It's A-plus all round for banter skills during pre-class drinks. Then, in the "classroom", our teacher, Sofija, provides a pithy history of conversation from the 18th-century coffee houses of London (Samuel Johnson thought that without talk, humans tended to give in to their "dark passions") through to Oprah Winfrey and phone texting. All in all, we agree that chewing the fat is a good idea - but how best to go about it? Sofija presents reflections and tips from the likes of Theodore Zeldin (*Conversation: How Talk Can Change Our Lives*), Woody Allen (*Annie Hall*), Monty Python (*The Argument Sketch*) and Sappho. At various points, we break up into groups, at one stage workshopping "adventurous openings" ("Who was your childhood hero?"). Then it's time to discuss those conversations we find difficult. Chardonnay, anyone?
Quote: "Do you prefer lace-up or slip-on shoes?"
Question for teacher: What's the most important thing to bring to a conversation?
"Curiosity and a sense of adventure."
Qualification: Mingleur par excellence.

Spanglish

School Laneway Learning.
Venue City cafe The Little Mule.
Teacher Carlos Portigliati Gonzalez, a Chilean educational psychologist.
Cost \$12.
Time 75 minutes.
The sell An entree to the lingo of Ricky Martin and Shakira: "Oye papi, if you like it mocha, come get a little closer and bite me en la boca."
Bring Sexapil.
Class The 16 students include Natalie, Lea and Hannah, all preparing to holiday in Latin America; and Annie, whose daughter-in-law is Colombian.
What happens? "I didn't say 'hair rings', I said *earrrrrings!*" growls Colombian Sofia Vergara in a clip that Carlos shows us from *Modern Family*. Vergara is the highest-paid primetime TV actress (according to *Forbes* magazine) in the US, where Hispanics make up about 16 per cent of the population. Carlos explains that more than half of third-generation-immigrant Latino youths meld English (from school) and Spanish (from home) into a hybrid lingo: they "wachar la TV", "microwei" their dinners, drink "beerveza" and say things such as "Janmortain (one more time)". Inconfundible! In 2011 there were about 100,000 people of Latin American origin in Australia. How to impress them? We practise our introductions.
Quote: "Tremenda freaky, super sensuality" (a song lyric from reggaeton star Don Omar).
Question for teacher: What is a good line?
"Hello, pa todos mis panas!" (Hello, my friends!)
Qualification: Can "talkear" a little Spanglish.