

# From Tree to Treasure

**>** THE CHISEL IN JEAN HENRI TERIIPAIA'S HAND IS steady. It'd better be. Each blow from his mallet forces out a thin shard of wood that will either enhance or ruin the Tahitian ukulele he's making. Yes, Tahitian. Not Hawaiian. This eight-stringed uke resembles a solid-body electric guitar and is made from what is basically yard trash. The shavings fall onto his property in Faa'a. One wrong move with the chisel, and this rare instrument will wind up in the trash.

**> Our ukulele isn't what you think.** It came to Tahiti about 100 years ago, maybe longer, around the time Hawaii's ukulele was getting popular. Our people changed the instrument so it would fit our music — twice as many strings, higher pitch, almost like a banjo. We also use different materials — island wood, fishing line for strings. This ukulele is just like the one my grandmother built and played. **> It's easy to ruin a ukulele.** When I make a mistake, I have to throw it away. [He picks up a

discarded uke and points to a small chip at the edge of the sound hole.] It's garbage. But when everything is just right, with no mistakes, each ukulele ends up with its own sound. **> For us, playing badly is better than not playing at all.** I started playing when I was this age [gestures toward small children watching him work]. Everyone does. I've seen kids at parties get teased for not playing the ukulele. But you can be teased for playing badly too. **> I was a bus driver when I started making ukuleles.** My neighbor



**> My technique uses purau [wild hibiscus].** It's hard to find. People call me when they have a purau to cut down. I have to get to it before word gets out because the wood is used for everything from carvings to grass skirts. **> I like it best when tourists buy my ukuleles.** Local musicians buy them too, but I feel most proud when a ukulele leaves Tahiti so it can transmit our culture to the world. — Told to Diane Selkirk

## TAHITI VS. HAWAII

You be the judge. Listen to the Tahitian and Hawaiian ukuleles square off. [islands.com/ukuleles](http://islands.com/ukuleles)

DIANE SELKIRK



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