

A Musical Journey

Ukulele-playing singer brings emotional brand to Port Townsend stage

BY DIANE URBANI DE LA PAZ
PENINSULA SPOTLIGHT

PORT TOWNSEND — Filipina ukulele player Aireene Espiritu calls herself “homeless but not roofless.”

She’s traveling around the West, playing folk, gospel, blues and bluegrass on her compact stringed instrument — and “having a blast.”

And it just so happens she has a good friend in Port Townsend who told her about The Upstage, that bistro and all ages concert venue at 923 Washington St.

Espiritu will be there Sunday night to sing songs of love and longing, epiphanies and experiences.

“Most of the songs I sing are about emotions people go through. I try to feel the emotions,” said Espiritu, who was born in the Philippines.

Musical stories too

She also tells musical stories about the ghosts and spirits that flitted through her bicultural upbringing.

Her family moved to New Jersey when Espiritu was 10, after that came Yonkers, N.Y., and then, just before she started high school, Oakland, Calif.

She stayed there, got a job at a film and video company in San Francisco and began singing and playing in a musical duo with

her then-boyfriend. Then, a year and a half ago, Espiritu lost her day job, her duo broke up and she decided to take to the road.

“I thought: I’m in my 40s, and it’s time,” she said, “to just do it. Nothing’s keeping me here. I looked at a map” and saw cities and towns across the country where friends lived.

She got in touch with them, and they invited her to come visit; she packed up her Toyota Prius and her uke and took off.

Wonderful music, friends

The music and the friends have been wonderful, Espiritu says, but her sojourn has not been without moments of distress. One night, she was craving some of her own home cooking but was staying in a place where the kitchen just wasn’t outfitted for her kind of cuisine. So she put together a portable kitchen: a box with a blender and her favorite spices.

“I haven’t had a freakout since,” she said.

As her songs carry her across the country, Espiritu is winning the admiration of music critics and radio announcers.

“Aireene’s songs are mostly originals. They just sound like songs Alan Lomax might have collected during one of his cross-



CECE CASPINO-WILBERD GALVA

Folk-gospel ukulele player and singer Aireene Espiritu arrives at The Upstage in Port Townsend this Sunday.

Where & when

- Who: Aireene Espiritu
- When: Sunday, 7:30 p.m. to 10:30 p.m.
- Where: The Upstage, 923 Washington St., Port Townsend
- Admission: \$8
- Info: www.UpstageRestaurant.com or 360-385-2216

country recording jaunts. They carry both historic sweep and personal nuance,” wrote the San Francisco Free Folk Festival’s Richard Rice.

Gene Shay of WXPB-FM in Philadelphia noted that Espiritu’s sound is “bright, melodic, rootsy and with excellent vocals and hot pickin’ too.”

Homespun fantasy

Her songs are both homespun and fantastical. “Fortune Lady” is about a woman whose astrologer friend predicts her meeting of the man who becomes her mate.

“Down at Albert Brown’s” is about the people working at a mortuary in Oakland — people who know how to hold a good celebration of life.

Then there’s “Lucky Little Star,” the story of a woman who wants children but has grown too old to give birth. She finds a basket on her front porch one day, with a baby girl inside.

Espiritu has been playing music since she was a child — but she picked the wrong instrument at first.

“I started playing guitar when I was little, but the fret was too big for my fingers,” she said.

While she kept at it, Espiritu never felt she played well. She continued to sing in various Bay Area bands, though, and she wrote songs. But without facility on the guitar, the writing faded.

Then, Espiritu doesn’t hesitate to say, a funny movie changed her life. “The Jerk,” starring a ukulele-playing Steve

Martin, made her fall in love with the instrument.

The song “Tonight You Belong to Me” clinched it, she remembers.

New life to craft

The uke opened a brand-new door for Espiritu, making music felt natural again.

“I got so addicted . . . my songs, my songwriting, started coming back,” she said.

She and her boyfriend performed as a duo for five years; at the same time, the ukulele’s popularity bloomed all over the country.

Back in the early 2000s, Espiritu recalls, one of the guys in one of her bands said, “I can’t believe you’re quitting the band to play ukulele.” Now that guy has two of them.

Espiritu will sing and play from 7:30 p.m. till 10:30 p.m. Sunday; cover charge at The Upstage is \$8.

To find out more about the artist, visit www.AireeneEspiritu.com, for details about this and other Upstage concerts coming up, visit www.UpstageRestaurant.com or phone the venue at 360-385-2216.