

The Magic Of A Yellow Ukulele | Jive Aces Spread The Happiness

By Lynn Redmile

I have to admit, I was pretty excited to be seeing the Jive Aces live at The Metropolitan Room in New York City recently — I've been a fan for a while. Sometime in 2011, a wonderful little YouTube video clip was making the rounds, passed along by swing dancers and others, and I loved it. It began with the portrayal of a gloomy lackluster world, bad news on TV, people bored and/or quarrelling, until a man with two-toned saddle shoes strolled along with his yellow ukulele, singing "Bring Me Sunshine" and suddenly the world seemed right, full of smiles, laughter — and jazz.

I couldn't help thinking this group was going to "make it big" with this little creation.



The Jive Aces at the Metropolitan Room on Jan. 17 (l-r): Vince Hurley, Ian Clarkson, Ken Smith, Alex Douglas, John Fordham and Peter Howell. Photo by Lynn Redmile.

The Jive Aces had been around a while. Meeting in London, the band members shared a common love for the music of Louis Prima, Frank Sinatra, Elvis Presley and Bill Haley, and loved to dance to it. But when they couldn't consistently find the live music they wanted to dance to, necessity being the mother of invention, they decided to create it themselves.

So who are the Jive Aces? Ian Clarkson has always sung, danced, entertained and performed, and loved imitating the likes of Clark Gable or Errol Flynn. With this personality and his proficiency on trumpet (and now, ukulele), he was ideal to be the energetic front man for the Jive Aces. John Fordham started performing classics on clarinet before switching to swing jazz, and embraced the tenor sax (a 1930s Conn is his favorite) during his tenure as a big band musician. His hot solos are key to the Jive Aces sound, and a great contribution to the band's energy. Trombonist Alex Douglas is also a high energy performer, and loves to physically get into the audience, or duel horns with Ian for a bit of excitement. Vince Hurley has been a pianist since he was four years old — his Oxford accent and degree from the London College of Music are quite a contrast to his strident piano and no-holds-barred showmanship, even wilder than Jerry Lee Lewis! In the rhythm section, bassist Ken Smith is a bit of an anomaly — being a lefty is one thing, but playing a regular (right-handed) bass left-handed (effectively back to front) is definitely curious. His deep love of rock 'n' roll and impressive proficiency at swing dancing anchors his impeccable rhythm firmly in its place, although it's not unusual for him to spin the bass around, or

even stand on it, while performing. Drummer Peter Howell has been friends with front man Ian since they were in school today. He was "mentored" by the music of Count Basie and Duke Ellington, although his favorite musician is Louis Armstrong.

The Jive Aces first performed in January 1989, at a concert in Paris, and their trademark wild high-energy floor show was a hit. The release of their first CD in 1992, *Jumpin' with the Aces*, increased their popularity across Europe and the UK. They perform in bright colored suits, and their fresh arrangements of classic swing, jive and R&B songs, such as those made famous by Louis Prima, Cab Calloway, Louis Armstrong, Dean Martin, Bobby Darrin, Big Joe Turner and Sammy Davis Jr., together with superb swinging originals, combine to create a spectacular stage show, well loved by their audiences. But it was soon after the release of the "Bring Me Sunshine" video, which quickly went viral, that things began to really change for the group. In 2012, they became the first band to ever reach the semi-finals of the television talent show *Britain's Got Talent*. This was followed by a performance for the Queen of England's Diamond Jubilee celebrations, and performances at the Olympics. They are the UK's top jive and swing band, and have performed at thousands of events in the United Kingdom and internationally in more than 30 countries. They recently headlined at the Royal Albert Hall in London, where they sold out the first ever swing dance held in that beautiful space.

So, back to their performance at the Metropolitan Room in January. Clad in their bright yellow zoot suits, the six-piece band took to the stage with

"When You're Smiling," and within seconds, the room was filled with their exuberance. The Manhattan Dolls joined them for "Boogie Woogie Bugle Boy," reminiscent of the Andrews Sisters with their three-part harmonies, coordinating outfits and Victory Rolls hairstyles. As the ladies returned to their seats, the band was soon joined by Ms. Cassidy Janson, the UK equivalent of a Broadway star, who has the title role in London's West End production of *Beautiful: The Carol King Musical*. Her vocal prowess is quite remarkable, and her energetic vibrancy and strong stage presence was a perfect match for the Jive Aces. Running through numbers like "Smile," (which they've released as a new YouTube video, evocative of Charlie Chaplin's

films), "Old Black Magic," "Too Darn Hot," and "All The Cats Join In," the Jive Aces and Cassidy crafted their magic, energizing their audience and melting away the cares of the world. The inclusion of mini comedy skits similar to the Three Stooges added another dimension of interest to their routine, generating a sense of anticipation among their audience, and Ian's easy banter brought giggles as we contemplated being separated by a common language from the British. "Just a Gigolo," and "I Wanna Be Like You" (in *The Jungle Book* style) were simply glorious. But no one (except them!) could've anticipated their medley of "Revival Day" and "Hey Boy Hey Girl" which showcased the extraordinary talents of Vince on the piano, with high side kicks, and jumps, while still playing. Ken's bass solo still has me flummoxed as to how he plays it backwards — but it's a perfect solution for a traveling left-handed bass player who needs to borrow or rent the bass wherever they go. Cassidy demonstrated her lingual dexterity with a blisteringly fast performance of "I Want You To Be My Baby." With the grand finale, everyone was on their feet, exuberant and literally uplifted.

Their current tour of the USA has ended, but the Jive Aces return in April — unfortunately, not to the New Jersey area. However, their new CD, *Spread A Little Happiness*, recorded at Chick Corea's state-of-the-art Mad Hatter studio, is available. It features 12 tracks in all, a fun blend of original compositions, and family swing classics, guaranteed to bring a smile to your face. For more information about their CDs, and upcoming tour dates, please check their website, www.JiveAces.com. 