

Finger-picking good

Discover the magic of a musical style that defines an island chain, writes **Phil Tripp**

ON ANY weekend, the smoke from sand-buried barbecue pits stuffed with pigs wrapped in banana leaves wafts through the neighbourhoods as pick-up trucks loaded with cousins carrying guitars and ukuleles crowd into backyards.

The beverages are iced and the wives and girlfriends prepare the spreads as the hefty Hawaiians tune up and a soft, swelling chorus of finger-picked tunes fills the air like the smoke, but sweetly.

It's a kanikapila, a native gathering of song-swapping. As a guest, you settle back and watch as each guitar is tuned differently. The lead melodies are supported by layered harmonies, and the result is as lush as the surrounding gardens. It's called "slack key" guitar, the background soundtrack to the islands of Hawaii.

The first music of the Sandwich Islands was Polynesian dance, but then the influences of missionaries and their hymns were adopted by the natives. In the early 1800s Portuguese sailors brought ukuleles and Mexican cowboys arrived with gut-string guitars. The latter, known as vaqueros, were brought by King Kamehameha to teach local cowboys called paniolos from the Big Island how to herd cattle.

Around the campfires at night, the new instrument intrigued the paniolos as one vaquero would play the melody and another the chords and bass. But when the paniolo tried to emulate them, their fatter fingers could not cope with the slim fretboard, so they retuned guitar strings to make it easier to play without having to move their fingers so much. This was called "slackening" the keys, which became the foundation of slack key music, played mostly on four tunings.

The Hawaiians wove their traditional chants and imported hymnal vocals into the Mexican and Spanish stylings as well as



mastering a finger-picking style that created a unique musical genre, and which has been a major export of the islands after pineapples, sugar and macadamia nuts.

On hearing slack key and other Hawaiian music genres, tourists took back the records, tapes and CDs, as well as now getting tunes via the internet, spreading the soulful songs to their friends.

The deep roots and inspired grooves took hold and were used extensively as background in movies, which spread the infectious music around the world, from

classics such as *Blue Hawaii*, *South Pacific* and *From Here to Eternity* to modern flicks such as *Forgetting Sarah Marshall*, *Pearl Harbor* and *50 First Dates*.

Slack key is infectious. It lulls, yet it can make you shake your hips and sway your head as if in a reverie.

Other Hawaiian artists made their mark in film scores, television ads and pop stylings such as the 350kg ukulele-playing falsetto singer Israel Kamakawiwo'ole — Iz for short. He captured the world's ears and hearts with a simple vocal and uke medley

of *Somewhere Over the Rainbow/What a Wonderful World*, followed by the unforgettable *White Sandy Beach of Hawaii*, and a host of other songs that appeared on radio, TV and in countless films. He died at 38 in 1997 as a result of complications from respiratory illness, but his music lives on and has carved a trail for other Hawaii artists to follow.

For those who want to experience the Sounds of Aloha first-hand, there is no shortage of festivals and free events. The Aloha Festivals (www.alohafestivals.com) are held over six islands from August to October with an array of shows, ceremonies and cultural events. It features concerts, a steel-guitar festival, hula performances and a Hawaiian falsetto contest, where high, sustained notes reach for the sky.

The Hawaiian Slack Key Guitar Festival (www.slackkeyfestival.com) has huge free outdoor shows starting in Maui (June 27) before moving on to Waikiki (August 15), Kona on the Big Island (September 5) and Kauai (November 14).

These are laid-back concerts going back 28 years, devoted solely to the masters and new geniuses of the genre.

There are local crafts stalls, food vendors and a family ambience. The day might begin with a 10-year-old virtuoso, blend into an expert quartet of Japanese slack-key practitioners, then barrel into a roundhouse of half a dozen backyard pickers who turn out to be two of the major slack key families — the Pahinuis and the Kamakahis — doing jolly battle with each other at a breathtaking pace.

No matter what time you go to the Land of Aloha, you'll always find home-grown music in the lounges of hotels such as the Hilton Hawaiian Village, Sheraton Waikiki, Halekulani, Moana Surfrider, Royal Hawaiian and the Marriott Waikiki.

The key music club and restaurant is Chai's Island Bistro, which features the best artists and excellent dining in the Aloha Market Place. Artists and venue schedules are in the *Honolulu Weekly* magazine or in the *Friday Honolulu Advertiser*.

ABOVE: Hapa Slack Key performers soak up the sun and the sounds on a beach in Hawaii.

FAR LEFT: A hula dancer embraces the Slack Key sounds at sunset.

LEFT: Slack Key guitarists in action at one of the many laid-back concerts on the island chain.

Pictures: HAWAII TOURISM AUTHORITY



THE DEAL

Getting there: one option is Jetstar (www.jetstar.com, ph: 13 15 38) to Honolulu via Sydney. Qantas (www.qantas.com.au, ph: 13 13 13) also flies from Sydney to Honolulu.

Staying there: an upmarket option is Halekulani in Waikiki (www.halekulani.com); mid-market is Embassy Suites (www.embassysuiteswaikiki.com). For more options visit www.gohawaii.com or www.accommodationinhawaii.com

Seeing there: concerts, volcanoes, beaches, hula performances, galleries, restaurants.

Slack key guitar: listen and buy at www.mele.com

