

Rhythms

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FEATURE STORY

EVERYTHING YOU ALWAYS WANTED TO KNOW ABOUT HAWAIIAN SLACK KEY MUSIC BUT DIDN'T KNOW WHO TO ASK.

BY PHIL TRIPP



From Australia, Hawai'i is the closest port of call in the United States and other than the Polynesians who landed there centuries ago, Captain James Cook was the first haole (whitefella) to hit the shores in 1770, naming them The Sandwich Islands. He must have marvelled at the rhythms and dance chants, largely religious without melody, always surrounding feasting and celebration. He was regarded as a deity when he landed with his men, thought to be the god Lono and they took advantage of this with the local women and food. As he was leaving to board his ship, with great ceremony and reverence, he stumbled on the rocks and was killed and eaten when the natives realised that gods don't trip up.

It was only a few decades before the isles were filled with the sounds of missionaries teaching the natives to sing hymns and Portugese sailors came with ukuleles. The acculturation of Hawaiians included falsetto singing introduced by some European immigrants. But the biggest influence on the musical culture came when a gift of cows to then King Kamehameha in 1830 multiplied quickly in the lush fields of the Big Island of Hawai'i, and the royal had to import Spanish vaqueros (the first real cowboys) from Mexico to teach his hapless subjects how to herd and care for the cattle.

The gut string guitar of the vaqueros was much like today's nylon string acoustic model with a softer sound than later models of steel string instruments. Around the campfires at night, they played either solo or one taking the melody while another filled in bass and chords. The Hawaiian cowboys (paniolo) were fascinated and some tried to follow on ukuleles but they were no match. Finally, when the vaqueros departed, they left behind their guitars as gifts and the paniolo found themselves unable to play with their fatter fingers. So they faked it.

The paniolo figured out it would be easier to play if they loosened, or slackened the strings and created new keys. Through this alteration of the strings, the paniolo created sweet sounding harmonies and Spanish influenced melodies with hymnal elements too that epitomises the "ki ho' alu" style that is known as slack key guitar. They blended their traditional chants at times, incorporated rhythmic roots and locked into a groove of soft sounding "mele" that was the common entertainment after work and in back yards on the weekends. It was known as "kanikapila" when the guitars and ukuleles were brought out over the smoke of barbequed meat and the vocals of chants, hymns and the occasional songs of sailors. They were jamming with guavas and passionfruit gently swaying in the trees and vines and a lilting rhythm in their hearts and hips.

Technically, they retuned the guitar from the Standard Spanish Tuning (E-A-D-G-B-E, from lowest to highest pitched string) very often to tunings with a Major chord, called "Major Tunings" (such as the popular G Major "Taro Patch" Tuning - D-G-D-G-B-D - from lowest string to highest). With a major seventh note in them, they're called "Wahine Tunings" (such as the popular G Wahine Tuning - D-G-D-F# -B-D, and the popular C Wahine- C-G-D-G-B-D). With the two highest pitched strings tuned a fifth interval apart, they're called "Mauna Loa Tunings" (such as the popular "Gabby's C" - C-G-E-G-A-E).

Less technically, they didn't have a lot of guitars so they started to

improvise chords and melodies in a combined strumming and fingerpicking style. They picked bass and rhythm chords on three or four of the lower strings with their thumbs and used their fingers to play the melody and fills on the higher strings. This evolved over time in the standards of "nahenahe" music which is one of the most beautiful words in the Hawaiian language translating to 'soft and slow, a close, gentle voice' much like the wind speaking.

But in the early-to-mid-1900s it was the touristy hula music that crossed the Pacific when this erotic dance form and its accompanying song styles were soon made sheet music favourites. This hula craze exploded with the advent of record players and radio live shows leaving the slack key guitars and newer steel guitar music in the backyard.

But two slack key masters plucked their way through the '40s and '50s. Gabby 'Pops' Pahinui from the tin shacks of Honolulu honed his chops on radio shows like *Hawai'i Calls* and session work with both acoustic and edgier steel guitars. The other was the Waimea Cowboy, 'Sonny' Chillingworth, who learned his style by listening, watching and imitating his elders and family members. While Pops died a poor legend in 1980, Sonny was the elder statesman, passing away in 1994.

Sonny joined Gabby's band Sons of Hawaii in the early '70s, which also featured Atta Isaacs who is a traditional slack key artist but with a jazz feel that blended well with Gabby's western swing steel. They attracted the attention of Ry Cooder, who travelled to Hawaii in 1975 to record *Gabby Pahinui Hawaiian Band, Vol 1* during a two-week long session at Gabby's home on the Big Island.

Cooder helped launch Gabby and Atta globally at this pivotal time of his own rise and included 'Yellow Roses' and 'Chloe' on his own *Chicken Skin Music* album with Tex-Mex accordion virtuoso Flaco Jimenez. It was truly the dawn of this new musical format and it built a fan base that included rising young pianist George Winston who was just building a new age empire with his Windham Hill label.

Winston also made the trek to Hawai'i and ended up creating a label of love for slack key as he had incorporated New Orleans keyboard players he revered such as Professor Longhair, Henry Butler, Dr John and John Booker. The guitar label was named Dancing Cat and Winston poured considerable profits from the hugely successful Windham Hill label into his island passions.

Unable to put Gabby to tape since he died due to drink and hard work on road crews later in life, Winston recorded Gabby's three sons - Cyril, Bla and Martin - who had played with their dad in various lineups. They still play solo and as a trio today. Pre-Winston, they had recorded four iconic albums for the Panini label in the '70s; *Gabby*, *The Rabbit Island Music Festival* and the two volumes of the Gabby Pahinui Hawaiian Band.

The labels that had captured slack key in its early days were Makaha in the '60s with Sonny, the Hula label with Gabby and Sons of Hawai'i and the equally sweet band Sunday Manoa which featured Peter Moon. The Lehua label, Poki Records and Pumehana issued recordings in the '70s and '80s with Led Kaapana and his bands Hui Ohana or I Kona while Music of Polynesia released Keola Beamer and brother Kapono as the Beamer Brothers. In the '80s, the Hula