

A Brief History of Slack Key Guitar

Hawaiian slack key guitar (ki ho'alu) is truly one of the great acoustic guitar traditions in the world. Ki ho'alu, which literally means "loosen the key," is the Hawaiian language name for the solo fingerpicked style unique to Hawai'i. In this tradition, the strings ("Via the keys"), are "slacked" to produce many different tunings, which usually contain a major chord, or a chord with a major 7th note, or sometimes one with a 6th note in it. Each tuning produces a lingering sound behind the melody and has a characteristic resonance and fingering.

Many Hawaiian songs and slack key guitar pieces reflect themes like stories of the past and present and people's lives. But it is the tropical surroundings of Hawai'i, with its oceans, volcanoes and mountains, waterfalls, forests, plants and animals, that provide the deepest source of inspiration for Hawaiian music.

These currents run deep in slack key guitar playing, as accompaniment to vocals, as instrumental compositions or as interpretations of vocal pieces. Slack key guitar music is sweet and soulful, and it is said that slack key is drawn from the heart and soul out through the fingers of each player.

There is a mystique surrounding slack key guitar music - it is very personal, and can be very magical in feeling. Slack key derives its unique sound from techniques such as "hammering-on" and "pulling-off." These techniques mimic the yodels and falsettos common in Hawaiian singing. Harmonics ("chiming"), produced by lightly touching the strings at certain points on the fretboard, and slides in which one or two treble notes are played and then slid (usually up) to sound another note, are also common. All these enhance the feeling of aloha, joy or longing expressed, sometimes all in the same song.

Like blues, slack key guitar is very flexible. Often, the same guitarist will play a song differently each time, sometimes using different tempos, and even different tunings. As each guitarist learns to play slack key, they find their own individual tunings, repertoire, tempos and ornamentations. It is a very individualistic tradition and, as one can hear from different recordings, each guitarist plays quite differently from the others.

There are different theories about the beginnings of slack key guitar in the Islands. Music is one of the most mobile of cultural forms, and the six-string guitar was probably originally introduced to the Hawaiians by European sailors around the beginning of the 19th century.

Web information can be like this..

Guitars were also brought to Hawai'i by Mexican and Spanish vaqueros (cowboys), hired by King Kamehameha III in 1832 to teach the Hawaiians how to handle an overpopulation of cattle. Many of them worked on the Big Island of Hawai'i, especially around the Waimea region.

2.

In the evenings around the campfire, the vaqueros probably played their guitars, often two together, with one playing lead melody and the other bass and chords. This new instrument would have intrigued the Hawaiian cowboys, or paniolo, as they came to be called, who had their own strong, deep-rooted music traditions. However, given the strenuous work, the Hawaiians possibly didn't have time to learn a lot about this new music.

When the hired cowboys returned to the Mainland a few years later, some of them gave their guitars to the Hawaiians.

See note 3 as to the "Accuracy" of the above.

The Hawaiians incorporated what they had learned of the Mexican, Spanish and religious music into their traditional chants, songs and rhythms, and thus created a new form of guitar music. Hawai'i's own unique musical traditions tended to dominate, as they did with the other musical influences that came their way from the rest of the world, and over time, it blended into a sound that became completely the Hawaiians' own.

At first, there possibly weren't a lot of guitars, or people who knew how to play, so the Hawaiians developed a way to get a full sound on one guitar by picking the bass and rhythm chords on the lower three or four pitched strings with the thumb, while playing the melody or improvised melodic fills on the upper two or three pitched strings. The gut string guitar (the precursor to the modern nylon string guitar) brought by the cowboys had a very different sound than the steel string guitar, which came to the Islands later, probably brought in by the Portuguese around the 1860s. The steel string sound caught on with the Hawaiians, and became very popular by the late 1880s, by which time slack key had spread to all of the Hawaiian Islands.

The slack key tradition was given an important boost during the reign of King David Kalakaua, who was responsible for the Hawaiian cultural resurgence of the 1880s and 1890s. He supported the preservation of ancient music, while encouraging the addition of imported instruments like the 'ukulele and guitar. His coronation in 1883 featured the guitar in combination with the ipu (gourd drum) and pahu (skin drum) in a new form called hula ku'i, and at his Jubilee (celebration) in 1886, there were performances of ancient chants and hula. This mixing of the old and new contributed to the popularity of both the guitar and 'ukulele. Kalakaua's conviction that the revitalization of traditional culture was at the root of the survival of the Hawaiian kingdom became a major factor in the continuity of traditional music and dance, and his influence still shows. This was a great period of Hawaiian music and compositions, actively supported, and many of the monarchy composed superb songs that are still well-known today. After Kalakaua passed away, he was succeeded by his sister, Queen Lili'uokalani, Hawai'i's last monarch. She was the greatest composer of this period, writing classic pieces such as Aloha 'Oe¹, Sano'e, Kuu Pua I Paoakalani, Pau'ahi O Kalani, Lei Ka'ahumanu and many other beautiful songs still played today.

¹See note 4

3.

Until the Early 20th Century, vocals were usually the most important element of Hawaiian music. The guitar was mainly relegated to a back-up role, often grouped with other instruments, and was played in a natural, finger picked style, with a steady rhythm, to accompany hula and singing. The guitar usually did not play the exact melody of the song, but played a repeated fragment with improvised variations using ornaments such as hammer-ons, pull-offs, harmonics and others.

A wide variety of tunings in several different keys were created to back up the singers effectively. When the strings were tuned too low, they lost their tone, and when they were tuned too high, they were likely to break, thus tunings in six keys were developed. (Most Hawaiians did not have a guitar capo, a strap or clamp which fits on the guitar neck and raises pitch, allowing the same guitar fingerings in a higher key.) The Hawaiians often retuned the guitar from the standard Spanish tuning (E-A-D-G-B-E, from lowest- to highest-pitched string), resulting in sweet sounding tunings with "slacked" open (unfretted) strings. The guitar was often tuned to a major chord, like the popular G Major "Taro Patch" tuning (D-G-D-G-B-D), or tunings containing a major 7th note (called "Wahine" tuning), or tunings with the top two pitches tuned a wide fifth interval apart (called "Mauna Loa"), and other combinations. The many ingenious tunings the Hawaiians invented fall into five basic categories: Major, Wahine, Mauna Loa, Ni'ihau/Old Mauna Loa, and miscellaneous.

When two or more guitarists play together, they often use different tunings in the same key. For example, one guitarist might use G Major tuning, and the other might use G Wahine tuning. Guitars can also be played together with different tunings in different keys, capoed up to various frets to sound in the same key. This is one way to appreciate the slack key sound.

Due to the distance between the islands, styles particular to each developed, sometimes specific to regions of an island. The Big Island, probably because of its size, has engendered the greatest variety of regional styles. Some O'ahu players, especially from Honolulu, have sometimes had more modern and varied styles because of their greater exposure to different musical traditions from the Mainland and other parts of the world. To this day, each slack key artist draws from the traditions of the area where they grew up and from the music of their 'ohana (family), adding to it their own individual way of playing.

Slack key guitar became part of the music that the paniolo would play after work or with families and friends at gatherings, and this paniolo tradition continues to this day on the Big Island and Maui. Since the 1960s, and especially now in the 2000s, Hawaiian slack key guitar has also evolved into a highly developed instrumental art form, in both solo and group formats. It is when played solo that the beautiful and unique intricacies of the slack key guitar can be fully appreciated, as the music of the masters has great depth and individuality.

4.

The most influential slack key guitarist in history was Gabby Pahinui [1921-1980]. The modern slack key era began in 1947 when Gabby (often referred to as "the father of modern slack key guitar") made his first recording of Hi'ilawe on an Aloha Records 78 rpm (#AR-810). Gabby was the prime influence for keeping slack key guitar from dying out in the Islands, and his prolific guitar techniques led to the guitar becoming more recognized as a solo instrument. He expanded the boundaries of slack key guitar, making it into a fully evolved solo guitar style capable of creatively interpreting a wide variety of Hawaiian traditional and popular standards, original guitar pieces, and even pieces from other countries. Many have also been inspired by Gabby's beautiful, expressive vocals and his virtuoso falsetto voice.

The Gabby Pahinui Band of the 1970s is a good example of the complexity of sound slack key can achieve. Along with Gabby, this band featured late great slack key guitarists Leland "Atta" Isaacs, Sr. and Sonny Chillingworth, and Gabby's sons Cyril and Bla Pahinui. Usually on the band's recordings, each of the guitarists would play in a different C tuning, providing a thick, textured sound.

Besides Gabby, two other highly influential slack key artists have been Leonard Kwan and Sonny Chillingworth. These three are notable not only because of their artistic virtuosity, but also because of the availability of their recordings, Gabby's in the late 1940s, and Leonard's and Sonny's in the late 1950s and early 1960s. Four of Gabby's earliest recordings from the late 1940s or early 1950s (on Bell Records 78 rpms) are especially impressive: Hi'ilawe (#505); Key Khoalu (#509); Hula Medley (#506); and Wai O Keaniani (#510). Other slack key guitarists were astounded and inspired by these four recordings, because of the level of Gabby's playing, and because each was in a different tuning. He also made many recordings in the 1950s for the Waikiki label, issued on three different albums: Hawaiian Slack Key, Volume 1 (#319), Hawaiian Slack Key, Volume 2 (#320), The Best of Hawaiian Slack Key (#340).

Awareness and popularity of slack key guitar were further increased by the release of several great slack key albums in the 1960s by Leonard Kwan, Ray Kane, Atta Isaacs and Gabby Pahinui on Margaret Williams' Tradewinds label. These four, along with Sonny Chillingworth, recorded in the 1950s, 1960s and 1970s (Gabby Pahinui started recording in the 1940s) and influenced all the younger slack key guitarists. Sonny Chillingworth, Leonard Kwan and Ray Kane have also continued to record and influence many others in the 1980s and 1990s. In the 1970s, albums were issued by the new generation of influential players such as Keola Beamer, Ledward Kaapana (with his trio Hui Ohana), and Peter Moon (with his trio The Sunday Manoa).

5.

There are four basic types of slack key guitar. The first is the simple but profound style, most evident in the older playing styles, such as that of the late Auntie Alice Namakalua. The second is a sort of "slack key jazz," with lots of improvisation, used prominently in the music of Atta Isaacs, Cyril Pahinui, Ledward Kaapana, Moses Kahumoku, George Kuo and Ozzie Kotani. The third kind creates a unique sound using ornaments like hammer-ons and pull-offs. These techniques are featured on Sonny Chillingworth's Ho'omalū Slack Key, Ray Kane's Punahēle, and George Kuo's Kohala Charmarita.

The fourth, performance-oriented slack key style, features entertaining visual as well as sound techniques. These include playing with the forearm, playing with a bag over the fretting hand (performed by the late Fred Punahoa and by Ledward Kaapana), and the intriguing needle and thread technique, where the player dangles a needle, hanging from a thread held between the teeth, across the strings while otherwise playing normally, which creates a sound a bit like a mandolin or a hammered dulcimer. This can be heard, performed by Sonny Chillingworth, on the fourth verse of the song Wai Ulu, on his recording Sonny Solo (Dancing Cat 08022 38005). The technique can be seen on the song Kaula'ili in Susan Friedman's film *Ki ho'alu, That's Slack Key Guitar* and in Eddie Kamae's great slack key film "The Hawaiian Way."

In the old days, there was an almost mystical reverence for those who understood ki ho'alu, and the ability to play it was regarded as a special gift. To retain and protect the slack key mystique, tunings were often closely guarded family secrets. This practice has changed with the times, as respect has increased for the preservation of older Hawaiian traditions, and now slack key guitarists are more willing to share their knowledge outside the family circle with those who sincerely wish to learn. Because many of the beautiful old traditions in Hawai'i have been changed by outside influences, this greatly increased respect for the older slack key traditions and the sharing of tunings is helping to ensure that traditional slack key guitar will endure and be shared.

Since the early 1970s (often called the era of the Hawaiian Renaissance), Hawaiians have increasingly looked to their cultural roots, and because of this, slack key guitar has steadily grown in popularity. The Hawaiian Music Foundation, founded by Dr. George Kanahēle, did much to increase awareness through their publications, music classes and the sponsoring of concerts, including the landmark 1972 slack key concert.

Currently, there are several major slack key festivals. The Gabby Pahinui/Atta Isaacs Slack Key Festival is held annually in or near Honolulu on the Island of O'ahu, every third Sunday in August, and the annual Big Island Slack Key Guitar Festival is held on the next to last Sunday in July at the Hilo Civic Auditorium on the island of Hawai'i. Other festivals also take place on Maui and Kauai, on the Mainland, and occasionally internationally.

6.

Because Hawai'i is one of the crossroads of the world, its music has always had many influences: Latin music from Mexico, Spain and Portugal; Polynesian music, especially from Samoa and Tahiti; European music and music from the Mainland, including jazz, country & western, folk and pop. All have been absorbed by Hawaiians, and they have enriched it with their mana (soul).

Hawaiian music has always enjoyed a reciprocal relationship with music from the American Mainland. Hawaiians began touring the U.S. during the early 1890s with acts such as the Royal Hawaiian Band, small string bands, steel guitarists and vocal ensembles.

The 1912 Broadway show *Bird of Paradise* helped introduce Hawaiian music (although not slack key guitar) to the Mainland, as did Hawaiian shows at the big Panama Pacific Exhibition in San Francisco in 1915. By the late teens, Hawaiian recordings were the biggest selling records in the U.S., especially acoustic steel guitar and vocal recordings.

Starting around 1912, blues slide guitarists (and later country/western steel guitar players) became more and more influenced by the Hawaiian slack key guitar sound, due to increased recordings and tours by Hawaiian performers. The pedal steel guitar was developed from the Hawaiian steel guitar, which was invented in the 1880s. Some Hawaiian steel guitar tunings (and thus, some of the Mainland steel guitar tunings) evolved from slack key tunings, especially the G Major tuning for the dobro and lap steel guitar, and the C Major 6th tuning (similar to the C Mauna Loa tuning) for the pedal steel guitar. (Steel guitar means any guitar played with a metal bar, regardless of what material the guitar is made.)

In return, the hot jazz of the 1920s and 1930s, especially the great trumpeters Louis Armstrong and Bix Biederbocke, influenced the Hawaiian steel guitar players, most notably Sol Ho'opi'i (1902-1953). In the modern era, the late Dave Guard of the Kingston Trio grew up in Hawai'i, where he was inspired by Gabby Pahinui. In 1961, he produced and recorded the *Pure Gabby* album, which was eventually released in 1978.

Although Hawai'i's guitar tradition is the richest in the Pacific, many other Polynesian countries also have guitar traditions closely related to slack key. For example, in the Cook Islands, especially on the island of Aitutaki, it is called *Ki Mamaiata* (or sometimes *Ki Amoa*), which translates as "early in the morning," a favorite time to play guitar there.

More slack key guitar recordings are now available in Hawai'i and on the Mainland and other countries, and several guitarists are touring more often outside of Hawai'i. With these factors and the increase of techniques and influences of today's players expanding the range of slack key guitar, the future looks good for *ki ho'alu*.

7.

Dancing Cat Records is currently producing albums, mainly solo, by some of the best players. The entire repertoire of each of the players are being recorded, as well as experiments beyond. The guitarists include Sonny Chillingworth, Ray Kane, Keola Beamer, Ledward Kaapana, Cyril Pahinui, Leonard Kwan, Ozzie Kotani, George Kuo, Moses Kahumoku and others. Also, an album of duets featuring Barney Isaacs on acoustic steel guitar (dobro), accompanied by George Kuo on slack key guitar, a combination curiously never found in a century of Hawaiian recording history.

NOTES

1. Tuning names (All given Lo to Hi)

five basic categories:

Major, Wahine, Mauna Loa, Ni'ihau/Old Mauna Loa, and miscellaneous.

G Major "Taro Patch" tuning D-G-D-G-B-D

F "Wahine" C-F-C-G-C-E

C6 "Mauna Loa" C-G-E-G-A-E

2. Relevant dates

1832 Three Mexican and Spanish Cowboys..

1860 Steel String guitar brought to Hawaii by the Portugese..

1883 King David Kalakaua crowned and...revived the Hula

1912 Broadway show Bird of Paradise...big hit

1915 San Francisco's Panama Pacific Exhibition Hawaiian exhibit a huge success

1917 Hawaiian records outsell all other in the USA

3.The THREE Vaqueros names :- Don Luzada, Mr. Ramon and Mr. Kussuth..came from California, that was at that time part of Mexico.

They were professional wranglers and had large saddles ornately adorned with silver.

The cattle were a BIG problem for the Hawaiians because they were quite vicious and not a bit like the domestic cattle of today.

It's also probable they DIDN'T play guitar or bring them to Hawaii.. there is NO substantiated account of them playing..Just the folklore that has built up since then.

The likeliest way that guitars were introduced to the Hawaiian Islands was via the Missionaries and visiting sailors.

It is on record that the missionaries had a hard time teaching the Hawaiians harmony parts to the Hymns, but once they grasped the melodic major thirds and sixths type of harmonies, they deveoped it beyond the simple structure of the Hymns.

MUSIC HISTORY

4. ALOHA OE

some differing stories

from Newsgroups: rec.music.opera

Lydia K.P. Kapa'ameha, later known as Queen Lili'uokalani, was a talented composer. Her works include "Aloha 'Oe," a kind of Hawaiian anthem. The Queen was indeed a fine musician, and "Aloha Oe" is indeed included among her works. She is the author of the song's lyrics, and it's likely that she arranged the music, but the tune is not original with her.

There were several musicians in the Hawaiian royal family (in addition to adopted son Charles E King), all of whom studied with Henry Berger, a Prussian military bandmaster. Berger came to Hawaii when King Kamehameha V asked the Kaiser to send someone to help set up a music program in the islands. Berger was the officer chosen, and after his four-year term was up, he quit the military and moved back to Hawaii where he became a honored citizen and favorite court musician for nearly half a century. Berger was fascinated with Hawaiian music, and took it upon himself to document it. Like so many colonial ethnomusicologists, Berger's methodology was terribly muddled. Not only did he insinuate his own style upon the natives in an effort to teach them about music, or to write out their compositions more "correctly", but he also borrowed heavily from Hawaiian tunes in creating his own compositions.

Nearly every original manuscript of early Hawaiian music is in Berger's hand, and it's a difficult puzzle to sort out what is his and what is someone else's. What we think of as traditional Hawaiian music is actually a hybrid style, combining indigenous Hawaiian music with German music -- not just any German music, but specifically the sort that a trained military bandmaster would bring: a certain amount of the classics, definitely, but also quite a bit of the popular music of the time.

The hybridization process had already begun earlier in the century, with Lutheran missionaries who taught musically inclined Hawaiians to sing their German hymn tunes. Berger merely solidified the process. The melody of "Aloha Oe" clearly derives from an old Croatian folk song "Sidi Mara na kamen studencu". Exactly how this tune came to be adapted by Liliuokalani is a topic of speculation, but the leading theory is that Berger knew the tune from a popular 19th century Austrian song "Die Trdne", which is adapted from the same melody. Liliuokalani is commonly credited as the composer of "Aloha Oe", but it's very difficult to disentangle her work from Berger's.

The original draft is written in Berger's hand -- which might mean that it's her composition and he transcribed it, or it's his music and he credited to her as a gesture, or the two of them collaborated in some way. Berger and the Queen had a very close relationship. They were intimate friends for most of their lives; she was his star pupil; and some historian have suggested, quite seriously, that earlier in their lives the two had a love affair.

from *Folk Songs Hawaii Sings* by John M. Kelly, Jr.

This song of farewell between two lovers is the most famous of the Queen's compositions, written in 1878. The tune of the verse resembles "The Rock Beside the Sea", composed by Charles Crozat Converse and published in Philadelphia, 1857. The melody of the chorus is remarkably close to the chorus of George Frederick Root's composition, "There's Music In The Air", published in 1854. There is a manuscript of "Aloha Oe" in Queen Lili'uokalani's handwriting in the Bishop Museum. Lahilahi Webb and Virginia Dominis Koch tell of a visit by the queen and her attendants to Maunawili Ranch, the home of Edwin Boyd in windward Oahu. As they started their return trip to Honolulu on horseback up the steep Pali trail, the queen turned to admire the view of Kaneohe Bay. She witnessed a particularly affectionate farewell between a young man in her party and a lovely girl from Maunawili. As they rode up the steep cliff and into the swirling winds, she started to hum this melody weaving words into a romantic song. At the top of the pali, a cloud hung over the mountain peak and slowly floated down Nuuanu Valley. The queen continued to hum and completed her song as they rode the winding trail down the valley back to Honolulu.

from *Chords for Croatian Folk Songs* :-

Very close relation between the melody of "Sidi Mara..." and ALOHA OE has been indicated by Branimir Vidmar, Timmins, Ontario, Canada, 1978. Vidmar also indicated that the melody is close to American gospel "How Great Thou Art," composed by K. Hine.

