

LINER NOTES

Barney Isaacs & George Kuo HAWAIIAN TOUCH

This pairing of Barney Isaacs and George Kuo is the first-ever recording of pure acoustic steel and slack key guitar duets, and the first release in the **Hawaiian Acoustic Steel & Slack Key Guitar Duets** series on the Dancing Cat label.

One of Hawai'i's premier steel guitarists, Alvin Kalanikau "Barney" Isaacs, Jr. was born in Honolulu on July 18, 1924. Barney grew up in a remarkable musical family that included his father, composer and band leader Alvin Kaleolani Isaacs, Sr., and two brothers, slack key master Leland "Atta" Isaacs and multi-instrumentalist Norman Isaacs.

"We were all exposed to music from the time we were little kids," remembers Barney. "We had a big house and music was there all the time. Our dad had a dance band that rehearsed on the premises. They played all kinds of music, not just Hawaiian." Alvin, Sr. actively encouraged his ten children to play. He taught Barney, Atta and Norman the rudiments of steel guitar while they were still in elementary school. "When my dad noticed that we were always playing together, he suggested we form a trio," Barney recalls. When the trio was formed, they had to spread out. "As the oldest, I got to pick first, so I stayed with the steel." Atta went to the guitar and Norman played the bass. "We could sing parts and everything.

At that time Hawaiian music was very danceable; fox trots, waltzes. We were always trying to keep up, learn as much as we could from the older guys and each other. Pua Almeida, Jules Ah See, the Kalimas, they were all our age. Jules' steel playing probably had the most influence on me. He could really make it sing. He had so many styles and different tunings. He was so adept at picking things up, but he never lost his own recognizable sound."

Alvin, Sr. was a very successful band leader and composer, and in 1948 Barney accepted a position in his father's group, the legendary Royal Hawaiian Serenaders. "It couldn't have been a better place to start -- in the Monarch Room at the Royal Hawaiian Hotel with that group -- my father, Benny Kalama, George Kainapau. They were really terrific." Since the late 1940s, Barney has been one of Hawai'i's most versatile and active performers and a globetrotting ambassador of the steel guitar. He spent 25 years with the Hawai'i Calls radio show and enjoyed long associations with Alfred Apaka, Danny Kaleikini, and his own groups at numerous nightspots.

Also active behind the scenes, Barney served as the musical director for Waikiki Records in the 1950s and even operated his own club, The Palm Tree Inn, turning it into a locally celebrated musician's hangout. Barney's father was well-known for the huge musical gatherings he liked to hold at his house in Kalihi. Following his father's example, Barney loves to bring musicians together to socialize and perform for their own enjoyment. He also teaches and serves on the governing board of the major steel guitar societies.

Barney's recording credits number in the hundreds, including groundbreaking electric steel and slack key duets in the 1950s with Gabby Pahinui and Atta Isaacs, accompanied by a rhythm section on HAWAIIAN SLACK KEY GUITAR, VOLUMES 1 AND 2 (Waikiki Records 319 &

320), which were the spiritual predecessors for this album. Barney says he feels a special aloha for this project. "The acoustic steel is the instrument I started on," he says. "Believe it or not, this is the first time I've ever recorded on it. I feel good."

The acoustic steel guitar, now rarely recorded, is only one of the reasons this album is unique: the accompaniment is George Kuo's finger-picked slack key instead of the more common flatpicked guitar in standard tuning; and the songs are pure duets instead of being backed with the usual, larger rhythm section.

George Kuo is a highly respected soloist and ensemble player who came of age in the 1970s, an era sometimes referred to as the Hawaiian Renaissance due to the wide-ranging revival of traditional culture. Like many musicians of his generation, George picked up *ki ho'alu* (slack key guitar) in high school, encouraged by friends such as Richard Rathburn and Antone Gabriel, whose grand uncle, Albert Kawelo, taught Raymond Kane.

"When I heard Antone, I said, 'That's the way I want to play,'" George explains. "My granduncle and aunt liked to hear that style too and they really encouraged me. There have been so many others, Ray Kane, Sonny Chillingworth, Atta Isaacs, Gabby Pahinui, Leonard Kwan, Tommy Solomon, too many to mention them all." Because of these influences, George very much embodies the older, traditional ways of playing, which he incorporates with modern improvisational stylings. A member of Eddie Kamae's group, The Sons of Hawai'i, and The Kipapa Rush Band, George recorded his first solo album, NAHENAHE (Hula Records 576), in 1980.

George has played with Barney and other members of the Isaacs *'ohana* (family) on many occasions. In addition to music, George and Barney have also played a lot of golf together as members of the legendary Kanikapila Golf Club. "Barney asked me to join around 1980," George recalls. "He was always looking for musicians who could play golf. I guess I was the youngest guy in there." The membership list reads like an honor roll of Hawaiian entertainers, including such luminaries as David Pokipala, Sterling Mossman, Pua Almeida, Alfred Apaka, Barney's brothers, and even some celebrated *malihini* (guests), like Bob Hope, Bing Crosby, and Arthur Godfrey.

"Traditionally we'd all jam after playing a round," George recalls. In many ways this album is an outgrowth of those remarkable moments at the 19th hole. "Sometimes we'd go on outer island safaris," George explains. "Barney started taking along an acoustic steel. That's how the idea for this album came about." Barney and George also played together in the Hawai'i Calls show in 1992, and performed once a week for live radio broadcast shows across the United States. In the studio Barney and George sought to cultivate a similar spirit of improvisation. "We tried some very impromptu playing," George says. "We had a lot of fun just bouncing back and forth off each other. That's basically the whole theme of the album -- give and take. We wanted to capture the feeling of Barney and Gabby's old Waikiki recordings, when somebody would think of a song and they would work out arrangements and modulations utilizing everybody's talents, each other's specialty. It represents a spontaneity that's very special. Hey, sometimes you can only play these runs that one time and that's it."

The title HAWAIIAN TOUCH describes the playing perfectly. As George points out, Hawaiian musicians have a unique, instantly recognizable way of phrasing. "You can fool around with other styles," Barney adds, "but don't go overboard. You gotta remember your Hawaiian touch. Keep it nice and sweet."

On this album, George's playing is inspired by one of his mentors, Barney's brother, Atta Isaacs. In slack key tunings, a song is almost always played in the same key the tuning is in. However, although Atta almost always used a C Major tuning, he very often played in keys other than C. Following Atta's tradition, George often plays in keys other than that of the slack key tuning. Additional duet albums by Barney Isaacs are planned, mainly with George Kuo, and also with several other slack key artists. George Kuo is also recording solo slack key albums for Dancing Cat Records' **Hawaiian Slack Key Guitar Masters Series**.

ABOUT THE SONGS:

Set One

1. *Maui Medley*

On this medley of six well-known Maui songs, Barney plays in A minor 7th tuning, (C-E-G-A-C-E from the lowest- to highest-pitched string.) He uses this tuning on all songs on this album, regardless of the key in which he plays. George plays in G Major tuning (D-G-D-G-B-D), also known as Taro Patch or Open G tuning.

Ke 'Ala O Ka Rose (The Fragrance of the Rose), a *paniolo* (Hawaiian cowboy) favorite begins this medley in the key of G. The song may have come to Maui's ranching community from the island of Ni'ihau, and is variously attributed to Daniel Ka'opio and Joseph Kelly. A poetically rich courting song, it praises a sweet, blossoming rose growing with the small leaf maile in the *kuahiwi* (mountain).

Mary Heanu and Johnny Noble wrote **Ka Loke** (The Rose), which is also known as **Ka Loke O Maui**. Like **Ke 'Ala O Ka Rose**, it is played in the key of G and also compares a loved one to Maui's official flower, which by any name, in any language, smells just as sweet.

Modulating to the key of C, and continuing with the rose theme, **Roselani Blossoms**, from the fertile imagination of the dean of Hawaiian music, John K. Almeida, expresses the author's interest in sipping the sweet water that flows in 'Iao Valley.

Barney and George return to the key of G for **Hanohano Olinda** (Glorious Olinda). This traditional *mele pana* (song of place) was probably composed to honor the estate of Samuel Alexander. It praises *ku'u home kuahiwi* (my mountain home) on the slopes of Haleakala.

Also set on the slopes of Maui's most famous mountain, **Kilakila 'O Haleakala** (Majestic Haleakala) takes us zigzagging along the trails of slippery sands. But never fear: our horse's steps are impressive. The song was composed by Charles E. King and is played in the key of G.

The *hui* (chorus) ends with the island's unofficial motto, **Maui No Ka 'Oi** (Maui Is the Best), which is also known as **Maui Chimes**. Credited to Samuel Kapu and John Kalapana, this exceedingly popular instrumental is known to most steel and slack key players. This is also played in the key of G, and in the second chorus Barney does a beautiful harmony to George's melody with artificial harmonics. Steel players produce these by 'palming,' a technique of placing the side of the right hand, usually twelve frets (sometimes five or seven frets) above where the note is played by the steel with the left hand. The harmonics are sounded as the right hand plucks the notes and the side of the hand immediately leaves the strings. For the bridge, they modulate to the key of C here instead of the usual key of D.

As George explains, "This medley represents our typical sequence. I allow space for Barney to take a lead, he allows me one. Sometimes we both come in together."

2. *Waltz Medley*

Waltzes have been a cherished part of Hawaiian music since the turn of the century when King David Kala-kaua would hold elegant balls at 'Iolani Palace with music by the Royal Hawaiian Band. Written by Violensky and Howard Johnson, **Honolulu Eyes** was most memorably recorded by Pua Almeida and His Polynesians, and by Barney with Gabby Pahinui as a beautiful electric steel duet for Tommy Kearn's Waikiki label (#319, mentioned earlier). Here, Barney solos in the key of G.

"Barney and I used to perform **Honolulu Eyes** on Hawai'i Calls," George says. "It really brings back the feeling of the '50s." George plays this medley in C Wahine tuning (C-G-D-G-B-D), known among slack key players as "Leonard's C," because it is favored by the influential slack key guitar great, Leonard Kwan.

George switches to the key of C for his lovely slack key arrangement of **Aloha No Wau I Ko Maku** (I Love Your Eyes) by Prince William Leleiohoku (1854-1877). In the song, he attempts to get and keep the attention of someone he admires, someone who has captured his heart. Leleiohoku, younger brother of King David Kalakaua and Queen Lili'uokalani, was trained musically by Henry Berger. He passionately loved music and wrote many memorable songs.

Wailana is sometimes attributed to dance band leader Johnny Noble, and sometimes to Mekia Kealakai, internationally renowned flutist and leader of the Royal Hawaiian Band in the 1920s. Barney says that this is one of his favorite songs. He hasn't recorded it before, but often performs it with his current trio, the Kahala Surf Serenaders, in a lovely three part harmony vocal arrangement. Here, Barney plays his solos in the keys of F and G to end the piece.

3. *Moana Chimes*

This steel guitar favorite is sometimes attributed to M. K. Moke, sometimes to Johnny Noble, and sometimes to both. It makes good use of the dulcet tones produced by lightly touching the string at specific parts on the neck to produce harmonics. In Hawai'i this effect is referred to as "chimes," and steel players and slack key guitarists frequently employ it to add color or to end a phrase. "If you're a master on chimes, you're really something," Barney says. "I never really pursued it in my own playing." As George points out, Barney tends to think of himself as an accompanist. "He never pushed himself out into the front," George says.

The song's intro begins in the key of C. Barney plays his solos, which include his trademark turn-around at the end of both verses, in the key of F. George is playing in the G Major tuning, and his solos are in the key of G. The song returns to the key of C for the ending.

4. *Pua Lilia*

The singing politician of Kaua'i, Alfred Unauna Alohihea (1884-1936), wrote this classic love song, a favorite of *leo ki'eki'e* (falsetto) singers because of its melodic contour, as steep as *na pali* (the cliffs) the lyrics so poetically describe. Many stories circulate about how the song came about: one hints that Alohihea's wife and another woman both had the name in common; another suggests that he wrote this tender song of affection for Auntie Lizzie Doirin to make up for a fight.

Pua Lilia (Lily Flower) is often played slowly, but Barney decided to do it in a medium tempo for the session. "When Barney did this on electric steel with Gabby for Waikiki (#319), he created a nice violin effect," says George, "but since there's no volume switch to play with, he uses chimes to get the soft, haunting touch." George plays some subtle, fast frailed-type fills to answer Barney, inspired by the way Gabby sometimes played his fills on the old Waikiki albums (#319 and #320). **Pua Lilia** is played in the key of C, and George is in the C Wahine tuning.

5. *Medley: Lei Momi & 'Ili Puakea*

Barney has always wanted to record these love songs, two of his favorites by his father, Alvin Kaleolani Isaacs, Sr. **'Ili Puakea** ("white skinned flower," a poetic term for a white person) is sometimes performed with English lyrics as **The Story Starts**. Marlene Sai has recorded a beautiful vocal version of **Lei Momi**. Barney is widely praised for his sympathetic accompaniment of singers. "Backing up singers you have to do a lot of concentrating," he says. "You've got to fill the empty spaces and not by playing the melody; you have to play something else, a harmony or a response of some kind. When you play instrumentals you have to be really accurate. If you make a mistake, you gotta roll right into the next note and make people think it's just a passing note."

Barney and George play **Lei Momi** in the key of G and modulate to the key of A for **'Ili Puakea**. George is in C Wahine tuning. During these sessions, George greatly expanded

his playing in this tuning, especially with chord harmonies to accompany Barney, and for playing in keys other than the natural key of C.

6. *Hula Blues*

Just as composers put the word "ragtime" into the title of many non-ragtime songs written between 1900 and 1920, so the word "blues" found its way into many song titles in the next few decades. More Tin Pan Alley pop song than blues, this enormously popular Johnny Noble melody, with lyrics by Sonny Cunha, dates from 1920, a time when Hawaiian musicians were eagerly integrating syncopation, hot soloing and other cutting-edge ideas of the time into their music. Noble debuted the song with his famous dance band at the Moana Hotel. According to all reports, it quickly became a local favorite. The song found its way into the repertoire of many Hawaiian and even non-Hawaiian bands, and has since traveled the world. Barney previously recorded this piece with Gabby Pahinui on Waikiki (#320).

"This was one of the first pieces we did," George says. "It was real give and take." The song's introduction goes through the circle of fifths from G7 to C7 before settling in the key of F for Barney's solo. George is in G Major tuning and plays his solo in the key of G. The song ends in the key of C.

Set Two

7. *Wehiwehi 'Oe*

In a practice very far removed from the music industry's obsession with copyright controls, traditional Hawaiian composers frequently give their songs to others as gifts. In the lovely **Wehiwehi 'Oe**, composer Sylvester Kalama adorns a cherished loved one with a song that becomes a *lei ho'ohiehie no ke ano ahiahi*, an elegant lei for the evening. "This is another of the Waikiki classics," George says. "It's a real slow, romantic tune. It's one of my favorites." Barney plays the intro in the key of C, then modulates to the key of F. George plays in the C Wahine tuning and his solo is in the key of C.

8. *Medley: He Aloha No 'O Honolulu & Mauna Loa*

He Aloha No 'O Honolulu (Farewell to Honolulu) has long been a favorite of slack key artists, and has been recorded by Gabby Pahinui, Ledward Kaapana, Keola Beamer, and others. Barney solos in the keys of G and C. George is in the G Major tuning and solos in the key of G. By Lot Kauwe, **He Aloha No 'O Honolulu** details an eventful voyage aboard the sailing vessel Mauna Loa, from O'ahu to the Big Island with a stop in Maui. The second piece in this medley, **Mauna Loa**, is played in the key of C, with George ending the song with a brief solo in the key of G. Popularized by Helen Lindsey Parker, "the Lark of Waimea," the song **Mauna Loa** asks the ship bearing the same name to return a missing lover to the Big Island.

"That's a nice slack key number," George says. "A good old-time *'olapa* rhythm (meaning a chant-style rhythm). Barney plays the steel close to slack key style in single string runs. "That's probably how steel guitar first sounded when it was being invented."

9. *Beautiful Kahana*

George returns to the C Wahine tuning for **Beautiful Kahana**. With melody by Charles E. King and lyrics by Mary Jane Montano, this song enjoys wide circulation as both an instrumental and a vocal. Barney takes his solo in the key of G and plays a beautiful harmony to George's melody in the second verse, as George takes his solo in the key of C.

10. *Aloha Nui Ku'uipo*

Ku'uipo is a term of affection that translates into English as "my beloved sweetheart." It appears in countless Hawaiian *mele ho'oipoipo* (love songs). George used to fool around with the melody on slack key, and he played it with Barney at a few parties prior to recording it. It's another of Barney's favorites written by his father and one of the standards he likes to play. Barney first plays in the key of C, and George, in the C Wahine tuning, plays his solo in the key of G. Barney again takes the lead as the last part of the song modulates to the key of D. Barney also played **Aloha Nui Ku'uipo** on his electric steel album, E MAU (Aloha Records 004), which features songs by his father, Alvin Kaleolani Isaacs, Sr.

11. *Medley: 'Ahulili & Nani Wale Na Hala*

Attributed to Scott Ha'i, '**Ahulili** refers to a mountain on Maui. *Lili* means to be jealous. The *mele* puts this coincidence to good use as it tells the tale of a widow courted by two suitors: one a hard working *paniolo* (cowboy) and the other a *kolohe* (rascal) musician.

George says, "We did it reminiscing how Barney and his brother Atta used to jam together. Barney plays his solos in the key of F and I play in Open C Major tuning, [also known as Atta's C (C-G-E-G-C-E)], with my solos in the key of C. We start real Hawaiian style, then move to **Nani Wale Na Hala**, which has beautiful jazz runs. We ended up with a duet in the last verse. The improvisation is real jazz-like, representative of the whole Isaacs family and really most of the players of that generation, including Gabby, Pua Almeida, and the Kalimas. I guess you could say they all broke out of the older tradition at that time but kept the melodies and rhythms and feelings uniquely Hawaiian." Also known as **Na Hala O Naue** (The Hala of Naue), **Nani Wale Na Hala** (So Beautiful the Hala) honors Queen Emma, referring to her as Kaleleonalani, the name she took after the death of her husband, Kamehameha IV. It is attributed to J. Kahinu.

12. *Goodnight, Mapuana*

Composed by guitarist Lani Sang as a lullaby for his daughter, **Goodnight, Mapuana** was recorded by the legendary Alfred Apaka, with whom Barney played for many years. "We did this together on Hawai'i Calls," George says. "For inspiration we kept in mind

the great vocal versions by Alfred Apaka and Gary Aiko. Barney got a chance to play with both of these great vocalists, and Barney and I got to play it with Gary." The song is played in the key of C and George is in the C Wahine tuning.

13. *Lahaina Luna*

Written by Kui Lee (1932-1966), one of the fathers of Hawaiian contemporary music, this song celebrates in very traditional fashion the beauties of the uplands area above Lahaina on Maui. **Lahaina Luna** was previously recorded by Barney on the album HAUOLI (Sounds of Hawaii Records 5026, out of print), accompanied by Atta Isaacs on slack key in C Major tuning. George honors Atta here by using the same tuning, and the song is played in the key of C. "I got to meet Atta through the family parties and through working for the City and County together. Atta worked for Roads Maintenance, and I worked for the Board of Water Supply with Atta's son, Jamie. When Atta would come to pick up Jamie, we'd talk story every day. I always admired him. Atta used to say that keeping the Hawaiian feeling was the main thing, even when you were improvising."

14. *Medley: Old Plantation & Ku'u Pua I Paoakalani*

The steel guitar, especially the acoustic, has rarely been recorded solo. Here, Barney plays a solo medley of two Hawaiian classics in the key of F.

Barney first learned the acoustic steel guitar around 1937, and **Old Plantation** was one of the first songs he learned. Barney used to play it for the May Day programs at Kala-kaua School ("May Day" is a Hawaiian cultural day when school children come out and celebrate with music, especially during their elementary school years).

David Nape composed the evocative, stately melody to **Old Plantation** to honor the old Curtis and Victoria Ward Estate, which stood at the corners of King Street and Ward Avenue - now home to the Blaisdell Arena complex. A prolific composer, Nape supposedly came up with the tune in about half an hour. The lyrics, written by Mary Jane Montano, expertly engage all of the senses with images of flowers of love dripping with fragrance, of cool, glistening water cascading from the old water wheel on the property. As the *hui* says, "*Old Plantation nani 'oe home pumehana i ke aloha i ka 'olu o ka niu i ka poli o ke onaona,*" (Old Plantation, you're beautiful, a home warm with love, cool coconut grove, with sweetness in your heart.)

Played in the key of A, the lovely **Ku'u Pua I Paoakalani** (My Beloved Flower at Paoakalani) was composed by Queen Lili'uokalani, perhaps Hawai'i's greatest composer, as a *mele inoa*, or name song, apparently for John Wilson, son of Evelyn Townsend Wilson. She composed it during the unsettled time following the illegal overthrow of the monarchy in 1893.

After skirmishes at Le'ahi (Diamond Head) and Manoa in January 1895, the new republic administration jailed a number of Hawaiian and foreign royalists, then put the queen herself under house arrest at 'Iolani Palace. She was forbidden information from the outside world, but the story goes that young Wilson snuck newspapers in to her wrapped in flowers from Uluhaimalama, her garden in Waikiki. Like most Hawaiian composers,

Lili'u makes good use of *kaona* (hidden meaning) in the chorus as she writes, '*Ike mau i ka nani o na- pua i uka o Uluhaimalama. 'A'ole na'e ho'i e like me ku'u pua la'i o Paoakalani* (Always see the beauty of the flowers upland at Uluhaimalama. There's no equal for my calm flower of Paoakalani.) Wilson was later elected mayor of Honolulu.

Notes written by Jay W. Junker and George Winston.

Tunings used on this album:

Barney Isaacs' Acoustic Steel Tuning:

A minor 7th tuning (C-E-G-A-C-E, from lowest- to highest-pitched string) for all songs.

George Kuo's Slack Key Tunings:

G Major 'Taro Patch' (D-G-D-G-B-D) for Maui Medley, Moana Chimes, Hula Blues, and Medley: He Aloha No 'O Honolulu & Mauna Loa. 'Major' indicates that the tuning is comprised of a major chord or contains a major chord.

C Major (C-G-E-G-C-E), also known as 'Atta's C' for Medley: 'Ahulili & Nani Wale Na Hala and Lahaina Luna.

C Wahine (C-G-D-G-B-D), also known as 'Leonard's C,' for Waltz Medley, Pua Lilia, Medley: Lei Momi & 'Ili Puakea, Wehiwehi 'Oe, Beautiful Kahana, Aloha Nui Ku'uipo, and Goodnight, Mapuana. 'Wahine' refers to a tuning containing a major 7th note, in this case, the second string, B.

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