

LINER NOTES

George Kuo

Aloha No Na Kupuna - "Love for the Elders"

George Kuo was born November 17, 1955 but his beautiful slack key guitar style dates back a generation or two earlier. "My feeling is in the older way of playing from the 1940s," he says. "For me, the old tunings with real loose strings and a real prominent bass have a lot of chicken skin (goose bumps)." George's feeling for the older style extends beyond technique to the more subtle area of attitude. "I like to play a nice relaxed, easy style," he says. "Not too much fancy stuff, keep it within the melody. Simplicity is really my style. I try to keep it simple but blend in the right notes. It's more delivering a message than playing runs."

George first took up guitar in elementary school and *ki ho'alu* in high school. He learned by being around friends such as Richard Rathburn and Antone Gabriel, who liked to get together and jam. Antone played in the style of his grand uncle, Albert Kawelo, who had taught slack key legend Raymond Kane in the early 1930s. "When I heard Antone," George says, "I said to myself that's how I want to play...the old style." George's family was very supportive of his music. "My granduncle and aunt liked to hear that style too," he says, "and they really encouraged me."

For a young person attracted to old style *ki ho'alu*, the 1970s were heaven in Hawai'i. A wide-ranging revival of traditional culture was in full bloom. Many *kupuna* (elders) at the height of their powers performed and shared their *mana'o* (thoughts) publicly – many for the first time. George visited with and learned from legendary figures such as Ray Kane, Auntie Alice Namakelua, Tommy Solomon, Sonny Chillingworth, Atta Isaacs, Gabby Pahinui, Uncle Fred Punahou, Papa Kauhi and others. "That was really lucky, a real rare opportunity to be with those old masters," he says. "They have a unique style. The expression and the feeling that they get when they play, you can see it on their faces. They concentrate hard, then they smile cause they feel the vibration, the *ona* (attraction). It goes throughout their body and moves their spirit. To me that's what the enjoyment is about right there. I still like to be with old folks as much as I can. If I ever run into an old timer who tells me he plays slack key, they may say that they haven't played in awhile, but I always encourage them because once they go, *pau* (end), you can't hear that anymore."

In 1979 George won an amateur slack key guitar contest at the Waikiki Shell. This brought him to the attention of a wider audience and launched his public performing career. Through high school and college, he continued jamming, playing the clubs (with Tino Jacobs, Ray Kane, Sonny Chillingworth and others) and studying with the masters. He acquired a large repertoire of standards and originals, which he continues to add to today. In 1980 he released his first album, NAHENAHE, on the Hula label. He also formed the group Kipapa Rush Band with a number of friends, including Wayne Reis, nephew of Atta Isaacs. In 1985 they recorded the album HARDLY WORKING for the Kahanu label. "We had a nice sound," George says, "a real nice traditional feeling with a little of today's music." In addition to slack key, the group featured steel guitar, reflecting the revival of interest among the young in this Hawaiian innovation.

In 1986 Eddie Kamae asked George to join his group The Sons of Hawai'i. George says he considers this a great honor and feels a special kinship with the other members. He also feels very comfortable with Eddie's style as a band leader. "He's not one to tell anybody what to do in the group," George says, "he just says, 'let's go and play and have fun', and we go. It's not a rehearsed thing. We don't talk about a lot of that stuff, we communicate it through playing."

This closely matches George's approach on ALOHA NO NA KUPUNA. "There's no overdub on the album," he says. "Most of the arrangements were done in the studio or a day or two before. I like spontaneity. It gives you a very simple sound, a very pure sound." Like most slack key artists, George often plays by himself at home to relax. Still, recording solo was something he never expected he'd be asked to do. "It's a different experience," he says, "but once you get into a feeling, a groove, it comes out real nice. The messages you convey can be real satisfying."

ABOUT THE SONGS:

SET ONE

1. **Waikiki Hula Medley: *Royal Hawaiian Hotel/Le'ahi/Kaimana Hila***

George assembled **Waikiki Hula Medley** based on musical and subject considerations. As he explains, "These are melodies put together thinking about places I used to go. I grew up surfing off Walls in Waikiki." **Royal Hawaiian Hotel** honors the world-renowned hotel of the same name. Prolific composer Mary Pula'a Robins created the song in 1927 for the hotel's grand opening. Also by Robins, **Le'ahi** takes its title from the Hawaiian name for Waikiki's most famous landmark, the volcanic cinder cone better known as Diamond Head. The name **Le'ahi** poetically points out that the *makai* (sea-facing) side of the crater resembles the head of an *'ahi* (yellowfin tuna). **Kaimana Hila** means "Diamond Head," a name given to Le'ahi by foreign sailors in the 19th century. The song is popularly attributed to Charles E. King and Andy Cummings. It celebrates the crater by moonlight as well as the surfing at the beaches nearby.

Waikiki Hula Medley is in the popular G Major "Taro Patch" tuning (D-G-D-G-B-D), tuned lower to the key of F, as George often does.

2. ***Manu Kapalulu***

Composed by Hawai'i's beloved Queen Lili'uokalani (1838-1917), **Manu Kapalulu** uses images of the quail to describe the behavior and sound of children. The melody and tempo reflect the bouncy pace of children at play. George associates the song with Eddie Kamae, who recorded a memorable version on the 1971 album, SONS OF HAWAII, on Panini Records. "When I used to run into Eddie in the nightclubs," George says, "I'd ask him to play **Manu Kapalulu**. There's such a great feeling on that song. When Eddie asked me to join them, I asked to put it into the repertoire. It made me so happy to hear Eddie's 'ukulele on that song. It's a great composition, and a great arrangement by Eddie. He blends a little classical and Spanish with the Hawaiian."

For this recording, George took the melody that Eddie transcribed for 'ukulele and put it onto the guitar. "It's a jumpy song with a nice bounce, like a quail," he says, "so I play all around the neck slack key style and I try to get Joe Marshall's bass style. He was great. He kept it simple, allowing everybody else space to move."

Manu Kapalulu is in C Mauna Loa tuning (C-G-E-G-A-E). Mauna Loa tunings are based on a major chord with the top two thinnest strings tuned a 5th interval apart. This way, these two strings can be played in 6th intervals, producing a distinctively sweet sound. The top two strings can also be "frailed" (strummed rapidly with the index finger), producing a characteristic sound of this tuning.

3. **KHBC**

Hawaiian composers have always celebrated significant events, and several well-known *mele* (songs) chronicle the arrival of radio in the islands. Aunty Vickie I'i Rodrigues created this rousing song to welcome Hilo station KHBC to the airwaves. On her DRINKING CHAMPAGNE album, Myra English recorded **KHBC** with slack key by the late great Sonny Chillingworth.

"The Sonny and Myra version inspired me," George says. "I used to fool around with them and Kalani Flores at some casual gigs. Sonny really taught me to have fun and enjoy playing slack key, sharing with everybody. He always played with a lot of feeling and he blended different styles of music with his slack key."

In tribute to Myra and Sonny, George interjects a special run. "It's almost like a blues run," he says. "But I love that vamp on Myra's recording. It's real catchy."

KHBC is in G Major "Taro Patch" tuning.

4. **Medley: Wai'alae & Koni Au I Ka Wai**

The lovely and graceful **Wai'alae** is performed here in a popular C Wahine tuning (C-G-D-G-B-D), often called "Leonard's C" because it is prominently used by slack key guitarist Leonard Kwan. Wahine is the term for a tuning containing a major 7th note, which is hammered on to produce the tonic note, one of the characteristic sounds of Wahine tunings. **Wai'alae**, written by composer and former Royal Hawaiian Band leader Mekia Kealakai, dates back to the turn of the century when the waltz was in vogue. He reportedly based the melody on a Mexican source. King David Kalakaua composed **Koni Au I Ka Wai**, a lively march that praises *ka wai ali'i* (the royal liquid). And what is that liquid? Like all Hawaiian poets, the royal composer uses ambiguity to create a variety of interpretations.

For George, this medley allows him to express his warm feelings for The Sons of Hawaii, especially bassist Joe Marshall. "Playing with Joe really made me feel like playing this kind of music," he says. "Eddie always asked me to play **Wai'alae** to open up the show, and Joe's favorite was **Koni Au**. He always sang it with such heart and enthusiasm. I

didn't realize how nice that song could be until I heard Joe play it. You can feel the love for Joe in that song."

5. *He Inoa No Ka'iulani*

Kalakaua's sister and successor, Queen Lili'uokalani, composed this *mele inoa* (name song) for her niece, Princess Ka'iulani. George learned the song while playing with Nina Keali'iwahamana in the Hawai'i Calls show in the early 1990s. Here, in one of his most powerful interpretations, he plays it on the 12-string guitar in C Mauna Loa tuning.

"Nina moves a melody so nice," George says. "I tried to put her phrasing into the slack key. I golf with Nina too, and after playing we'd have a *kanikapila* (jam session). Despite the modern times, with all the pressures, when you play slack key it brings back all the good times. At a Hawaiian party everything gets loosened, it gives you that feeling behind the music ... almost like a voice behind the voice coming in. That's when the slack key comes out real nice."

6. *Old Paniolo*

In G Wahine tuning (D-G-D-F#-B-D), **Old Paniolo** (Old Cowboy) pays tribute to slack key pioneer and composer Aunty Alice Namakelua. "I used to go up to her apartment and she would show me her runs," he says. "One day she told me, 'People think that I can only play the one style that you always hear me playing, but I can jam too!' and she started playing pretty fast, real nice runs and notes. I said, 'Gee, you've been hiding the old family secret.' She was the inspiration for this original melody. In her G Wahine she had this bounce, different from everybody else's."

SET TWO

7. *Aia I Ka Maui*

Aia I Ka Maui (There's The Maui) describes a sailor's travels back in the days when Honolulu was the only big town in Hawai'i. Solomon Kaopio, who apparently served on The Maui, wrote it. George also recorded this rollicking *mele* with the Kipapa Rush Band on the HARDLY WORKING album.

"**Aia I Ka Maui** leaves lots of room for improvising," George says. "I did the arrangement for Kipapa Rush and just carried that over to solo slack key in G Taro Patch tuning. In Taro Patch you can get a real distinctive bass and play many different melody patterns and rhythms." George utilizes the whole range of Taro Patch here, but keeps the sweetness that's so important in Hawaiian music. "When you get away from that sweetness," George says, "you're doing another kind of music, not Hawaiian."

8. *Golf Swing*

George is an avid golfer and belongs to the legendary Kanikapila Golf Club started by steel guitar master Barney Isaacs. "In both golf and slack key, the secret is good tempo and timing," he says. "That's what I'm after in this song. It has a nice little bounce, characteristic of Wahine tunings. You have this hammer on; open string to the first fret. The feeling is from the 1950s, smooth and loose like a jam session."

"This is the second piece that I've put together in Gabby Pahinui's C Wahine tuning (C-G-E-G-B-E, sometimes called "Hi'ilawe" tuning because Gabby recorded his signature song in it)," George says. An original composition, it debuted in Eddie Kamae's film LISTEN TO THE FOREST. "It's in the scene when Bea Krause is talking about shampoo ginger."

9. *Honesakala*

A classic Hawaiian waltz, **Honesakala** uses the honeysuckle as a symbol of love and betrayal. The story in the song is true and concerns a young *paniolo* (cowboy) who left Hawai'i to attend school on the mainland (old-time Kohala residents can tell you the names of the people involved). When he returned, he had to find out for himself that his love was in vain. Kohala folklore maintains that the bitterness of the lyrics led to disaster for the author; another example of the *mana* (power) connected with Hawaiian music.

George's love for the song dates back to jam sessions with steel guitar master David "Feet" Rogers. "He had a beautiful way of sharing," George recalls, "always real considerate. You didn't have to be an all-star to play with him, just get in the spirit and join in. He played a real sweet style, with little surprise riffs to throw you off guard. I tried that on this song with a bass run and the modulation from C to G. Barney and Atta Isaacs showed me how to modulate, especially with 7th chords. That's the progressive part of Hawaiian music that comes from jazz."

George plays this song in "Leonard's C" tuning. The modulating transition 7th chords to the key of G are inspired by Atta, who played his jazz-influenced slack key in C Major tuning (G-C-E-G-C-E).

10. **Medley: *Wai O Ke Aniani* & '*Ahulili***

The bouncy **Wai O Ke Aniani** is a slack key standard closely associated with "Pops" Gabby Pahinui, who first recorded it around 1947 for the Bell label. The title is often translated as "clear water," but, typical of Hawaiian poetry, other meanings are possible.

Wai O Ke Aniani is a popular jamming song among slack key guitarists. "Some people might say 'I'm not going to record that, it's been done so many times,' but to me it's how it's played," says George. "This one was probably the most spontaneous recording we made. Fooling around, you find something that fits; you go, 'Ah, that's the one!'"

Attributed to Scott Ha'i, '**Ahulili** tells of a widow courted by two suitors. One is a hard-working *paniolo* who rides the range, the other is a *kolohe* (rascal) musician who sits under a mango tree playing guitar. '*Ahulili* refers to a mountain on Maui. *Lili* means to be

jealous. The *mele* puts this coincidence to good use. "This medley came from putting together songs Gabby would do," George says. "It keeps real close to the melody, with a lot of syncopation, which Gabby liked. It makes it come alive, smooth, then bouncy, then smooth again."

It is played here in the G Major "Taro Patch" tuning.

11. *Aloha Chant*

Composed by poet and philosopher Pilahi Paki, **Aloha Chant** appeared on the 1971 SONS OF HAWAII album.

"One time we performed at the Chozen-Ji Zen Buddhist temple in the back of Kalihi," George says. "Pilahi Paki was getting some kind of recognition for the Spirit of Aloha, so we performed **Aloha Chant**. This place in the back of Kalihi Valley had a lot of aloha."

George plays it in the same C Mauna Loa tuning that Gabby used on the Sons of Hawaii recording. "Mauna Loa tuning has a beautiful range from nice deep lows to an almost haunting high," George says. "It's almost like where you can sing in a baritone then go up to a falsetto. A lot of the playing is in letting the notes really ring."

12. *Lullaby Chimes*

An original composition in G Major "Taro Patch" tuning, **Lullaby Chimes** combines the sounds of *ho'opapa* (harmonic chimes) with a hypnotically *nahenahe* (relaxing) feeling. "I play that way to put myself to sleep," George says. "It's spiritual, lilting, it's like getting a *lomilomi* (massage). The vibrations pass through your body when you play this style. You feel it in your fingers and arms, your back. Gabby and Joe Marshall used to call that the *ona*, you know, *onaona*. When you hit certain phrases, it's like you hit the *ona*."

George stresses the importance of emotion when talking about slack key. "It's a very personal kind of art," he says, "and it displays a lot of the person's feelings. You can make it fit to the mood you're in. If you're feeling sad, you can make the notes really linger and cry. And if you're feeling creative, you can really take off. You can speed up the song and make it bouncy or you can take a bouncy song and make it hypnotic and dreamy. The nicest time for slack key is *aumoe* (late at night), everything is quiet and calm and you can hear the spirit of all the ancestors. The tradition is passed on in slack key; you can feel that."

13. *Mauna Loa Blues*

Mauna Loa Blues dates back to George's first explorations of the C Mauna Loa tuning. "When I was first learning the Mauna Loa tuning," he says, "I came across these runs and put them together trying to bring out the nicest sounds. It was real exciting to be playing in that tuning."

This live recording is from a 1986 acoustic solo guitar concert at Orvis Auditorium at the

University of Hawai'i. For George, a concert focuses attention on the music. "You pick the songs and you can arrange them around a theme," he says. "In a concert, people are really concentrating on the music, so the subtlety comes out. Every note that you pull off is going to result in some kind of a reaction from the audience. Also, how you feel can affect the audience. If you're feeling good and relaxed, then the audience will loosen up. They adjust to you."

Playing in a club tends to be more of a social event in which music plays a less dominant role. "In a club, there's a lot more noise," he says, "there's a lot more things going on. The people aren't always paying attention to the music. At a club, people a lot of times request songs and you have to adjust to them. That's all part of the fun. It's a lot more loose and high energy entertainment. But no matter where you're playing, it's the greatest satisfaction when you see people smile. When you see you're bringing happiness to them, that brings happiness to you, too."

Liner notes written by Jay W. Junker and George Winston.

GEORGE KUO'S TUNINGS FOR THIS ALBUM:

George often tunes a whole step below concert pitch, thus a G tuning would sound in the key of F and a C tuning in the key of Bb. This is very common in the slack key tradition.

G Major "Taro Patch" (D-G-D-G-B-D) for Waikiki Hula Medley, KHBC, Aia I Ka Maui, Medley: Wai O Ke Aniani & 'Ahulili, and Lullaby Chimes

G Wahine (D-G-D-F#-B-D) for Old Paniolo

C Wahine "Leonard's C" (C-G-D-G-B-D) for Medley: Wai'alaie & Koni Au I Ka Wai and Honesakala

C Wahine "Hi'ilawe" (C-G-E-G-B-E) for Golf Swing

C Mauna Loa (C-G-E-G-A-E) for Manu Kapalulu, He Inoa No Ka'iulani, Aloha Chant, and Mauna Loa Blues

MAHALO: To all my musical friends, especially the older ones who were kind enough to share their knowledge and love of slack key and share each other's company. Grandparents, granduncles and aunts, parents, George Winston, Howard Johnston, Richard Rathburn, Antone Gabriel, Albert Kawelo, Tino Jacob, Ilima Piianaia, Leimomi Apoliona, Barney Isaacs, Wayne Reis, Sonny, Gabby, Atta, Eddie, Dennis, Joe Marshall, Ray, Herb, Ocean, Charlie, Uncle Fred, Uncle Tommy Solomon, Tini Natto, Alike Ngum, Leonard Kwan & Leonard, Jr., Oz Kotani, Doug Ching, Aaron Mahi, Keith Haugen, Mat Nakamura, Peter Medeiros, Byron Yasui, Leimomi Akana, Violet Almeida, Kawika Chung, Gary Aiko, Lani Maa, Alvin Meyers, Nina, Lani, Mackey and Boyce Rodrigues, Bill Kaiwa, Uncle Alvin, Kiki, Cookie, Myrna and Ernie and Kathy.

"The music evolves each time from the interaction of the people involved."

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