

LINER NOTES

James "Bla" Pahinui

MANA

James Daniel "Bla" Pahinui was born in 1942 and raised in Waimanalo. He is the second-oldest son of slack key legend Charles Philip "Gabby" Pahinui. A founding member of The Sunday Manoa, The Gabby Band and The Pahinui Brothers, Bla proudly perpetuates his family's heartfelt commitment to Hawaiian music. He plays and sings with tremendous *mana* (spiritual power or soul) and exhibits profound aloha for humanity both in and outside the music realms. Currently Bla works for the City and County of Honolulu Department of Parks & Recreation and has counseled troubled youth with Job Corps.

Bla's first instrument was a two by four with four nails at the top, four nails at the bottom and fishing line stretched between. "When I was real young I used to play with that for hours," Bla says. "Then, when I was ten my father bought me a Martin tenor 'ukulele. It cost \$78, a lot of money back then. The first song he taught me to play on it was **Poor People of Paris.**"

As a teenager, Bla got into Latin music. "A school mate showed me all the licks, what goes where, and another friend taught me flamenco," he says. Bla retains his love for Latin music. "I just saw the biography of the Gypsy Kings. Awesome, and their jam sessions are almost identical to my dad's."

Besides Hawaiian and Latin music, Bla also heard a lot of R&B in the '50s. Even today, if you mention the names, he can sing the songs. "Shep and The Limelights, Frankie Lymon & The Teenagers, The Ponytails, Lee Andrews & The Hearts, Bob & Earl, Bobby Day & The Hollywood Flames...Oh man, those are GREAT songs!"

Betty Reilly had a nightclub in Waikiki and, as Bla recalls, "She brought all the Mainland groups. What a joy! We'd stay there all night." Bla and his friends even started their own rock band, The Playboys. "We did a lot of Chuck Berry songs. I played a Telecaster. We used to blow. Good fun days."

Gabby encouraged music in the family. "He bought me everything I wanted," Bla says, "including a purple Les Paul." Gabby never criticized his children's music. "He knew I was a rock'n'roller, but he never said anything about that. He told me once that Hawaiian music is the foundation, but he never told me what to play. He always said, 'play whatever you feel, whatever makes you happy, but always keep Hawaiian music in your heart.' It took me a lot of years to realize where he was coming from."

By the early 1960s, with the folk music boom in full swing on the mainland, Bla began getting back to acoustic instruments and Hawaiian roots. In 1962, he met Peter Moon at Ala Moana Bowls, a popular surfing site. "Peter always carried his 'ukulele with him, so I started bringing down my guitar." In 1966 Peter came up with the idea of doing an album with Palani Vaughn and Bla's brother Cyril. "We came out with the album MEET PALANI VAUGHN & THE SUNDAY MANOA (Hula Records). After that, Palani left and Cyril went in the service. Peter, Albert Kalima, Jr. and I carried on with the HAWAIIAN TIME album."

Finally, in the early 1970s, Bla joined his father and brothers, Philip, Cyril and Martin in The Gabby Band, one of the most beloved and influential groups of the 1970s. "My dad always wanted his sons with him," Bla recalls, "but he knew the only way he would get that was when the time was right. So when he left The Sons of Hawai'i, he got us together with him, slack key guitarists Uncle Sonny Chillingworth and Leland 'Atta' Isaacs, and bassist Joe Gang."

In their day, at the height of the Hawaiian Renaissance, The Gabby Band filled stadiums, outsold the big rock releases and revitalized the slack key scene. Gabby Pahinui became an icon for local kids of all musical and ethnic backgrounds. "My dad was really flowing back then," Bla says. "He had all this talent and all this support around him. But after five albums, everything came to a standstill. There were problems, so my dad stayed away from music for awhile and really got into my mom and the family. He wanted to do another album with the sons alone. But the sad thing was that the sons weren't ready. That was his biggest wish, but the Lord took him October 13, 1980."

Throughout the 1980s, Bla continued to perform with friends and family. In 1992 Bla, Cyril and Martin finally recorded an album together entitled THE PAHINUI BROTHERS. Recorded on Maui, with Ry Cooder, David Lindley, Jim Keltner, Van Dyke Parks, Dwight Yoakam and other Mainland artists, the album came out to rave reviews. Since then Bla has been recording solo for Dancing Cat.

Bla plays the guitar in a unique left-handed fashion: upside down and backwards. He plays all the songs on this album in the in the key of D in the "Dropped D" tuning (D-A-D-G-B-E) from the lowest pitched string to the highest, either on the nylon string or steel string guitar. He has a unique sound, playing in an almost-standard tuning (except for the lowered 6th string), but also his strum with his thumbnail, strumming as well as picking his bass with his index finger and picking the high pitches with his thumb, the opposite way of players who play the guitar the normal way.

In the studio, Bla found working solo a challenging but rewarding experience. "Seven days a week I started playing my guitar, looking for something. That felt so totally different, hearing only what one person can do." Through the struggle, Bla came to some profound realizations, including interpreting traditional and standard pieces both as vocals and as instrumentals, composing original instrumental pieces, and experimenting with other tunings such as the G Major "Taro Patch" tuning.

Bla says as he gets older he sees what it means to be part of a tradition. Because of the Pahinui heritage, he believes it's important to keep sharing music with others. These days he enjoys playing solo, dropping by to play with friends like Mike Ka'awa at Shipley's or sitting in with The Native Hawaiian Band. "As far as following what Gabby left behind, there's no way because only he could do that. If somebody told me I could fill his shoes, I'd laugh. Maybe ten years ago I would've believed that but today, no way. I'd rather go fishing or walk with my wife down the beach. For me, music is one thing, life another. Without a good life, what is music?"

About the Songs

Set One

1. *Incoming*

The title of this original serves an important function among several slack key players and their ex-servicemen friends. "It's a joke we use when the enemy's approaching," Bla says. "Somebody says 'incoming' and that's the signal...run for the door, somebody you don't want to see is coming."

2. *Ka'ena*

Samuel K. Halstead's best-known composition refers to the western-most point on O'ahu, an important and sacred spot in traditional Hawaiian culture. The lyrics describe inviting eyes, a soft voice and a lei of pearls moistened by the seaspray. Bla originally recorded the song with The Sunday Manoa on the HAWAIIAN TIME album, and it became a local standard. "I got a lot of requests for **Ka'ena**," Bla says, "but I never did it before because I never practiced it. With the chance to record it, I made the time to re-learn it."

3. *Aloha Ka Manini*

Lot Kauwe's tribute (on the surface at least) to the manini, popolo and other reef fish, **Aloha Ka Manini** receives a complete reworking of the melody by Bla. Hawaiian musicians are very creative and individualistic in their interpretations of songs, and Bla's changes in both melody and time signature takes this to a new level. "I was playing around in the studio on the steel string, using a bunch of different chord changes, and worked in a little bit of Latin influence. It really gives it a different texture."

4. *E Aloha E (Embracing Life)*

Bla adapted the music for this piece from an old party song called **Uka Good**, and Wally Naope wrote new lyrics. "Wally's a good friend of mine," Bla says. "He's like a teacher to me. I asked him to write some new verses and I put together some new music. It came from deep within our hearts. When I hear it I get chicken skin."

5. *Meleana E*

A turn-of-the-century party song about Mary Ann, who, as the lyrics say, likes to give massages - among other things. Aunty Genoa Keawe recorded a very swinging version on her album LUAU HULAS. The Ho'opi'i Brothers recently recorded it in the classic chalangalang style on their album Ho'omau. "There are so many ways to play this song," Bla says. "We had a good time recording this."

6. *Kaua'i Beauty*

This beautiful song by Henry Waiau pays tribute to the Garden Isle and to a beloved

mokihana lei that will never be forgotten. As a member of The Gabby Band, Bla helped record the well known version that can be heard on RABBIT ISLAND MUSIC FESTIVAL. "That's one of my favorites of all the favorites of my dad," Bla says. "It's the way he sang it from the heart. They still play it a lot on the radio and every time I hear it I get chicken skin. When I recorded it on the steel string, I cried. There's only one man for me and I did it with love for him, my dad, to say thank you."

Set Two

7. *Gabby Kai*

An original instrumental composition, **Gabby Kai** came to Bla in 1994. The title comes from the name of his brother Peter's fishing boat, named after Gabby. *Kai* is Hawaiian for the sea. "I always told myself I wasn't a slack key player," he explains. "I was my father's right-hand rhythm guitar player. He always wanted me on his right side to keep the meter, not plucking but full-on six string strumming. That was my job, so I never did use my fingers. But playing solo, I experimented a couple months, seven days a week, plucking away, adding runs, changing keys. It really started getting radical and that's when **Gabby Kai** came into view. I'd play it in the studio and finally one night, bingo. It came out totally different from what I originally thought, but it was good fun."

8. *Ku'u Ipo (I Ka He'e Pu'e One)*

The *ali'i* (royalty) of Hawai'i have traditionally been active patrons of music and dance. **Ku'u Ipo I Ka He'e Pu'e One** illustrates this well. Composed by Princess Likelike (1851-1887), the title refers poetically to a sweetheart who surfs over the sand bar into the mouth of the stream.

Accomplished on piano, guitar and 'ukulele, Princess Likelike was important to the musical life of her day. She and her royal siblings, Kalakaua, Lili'uokalani and Leleiohoku, are often referred to collectively as *Na Lani 'Eha*, the Four Chiefs, for their contributions to Hawaiian music. With a highly developed poetic sense and a remarkable ability to adapt outside influences to local use, they worked to preserve *mele kahiko* (ancient style chant and hula) and popularize newer forms of song and dance.

Princess Likelike was particularly close to her older sister, Hawai'i's greatest composer Queen Lili'uokalani, who wrote **Aloha 'Oe** and over 150 other pieces. Although Likelike's music is not as well known as that of her siblings, several of her songs continue to circulate widely. She also influenced other writers. For example, the phrasing of the melody in this *mele ho'oipoipo* (love song) established a fairly common pattern heard in many later songs.

"I fell in love with this song when the Cazimeros did it," says Bla. As in the earlier **Aloha Ka Manini**, Bla creatively reworked the melody of **Ku'u Ipo** to suit himself, and changed the time signature to 3/4.

9. *Sanoë*

Another highly personalized treatment, here of a Monarchy-era standard from the days of diaries, love poetry, waltzes and serenades. By Queen Lili'uokalani and Kapeka Sumner, **Sanoë** describes a romance at the court of Lili'u's elder brother, King David Kalakaua. **Sanoë** was brought back into general circulation by 'ukulele master Eddie Kamae and Gabby with the Sons of Hawaii on MUSIC OF OLD HAWAII.

"For me, this goes back to my dad," says Bla. "A lot of the Hawaiian songs go back to my dad."

10. *Maori Brown Eyes*

Bla does a unique, instrumental nylon-string version of Claude Malani's slack key classic, which extols the beauty and powerful attraction of a certain resident of Aotearoa, the land of the long white cloud, also known as New Zealand. "This one came right out of the blue," Bla says. "Just one take. We didn't even rehearse. It's all heart."

Maori Brown Eyes was originally played as a waltz back in the 1920s and '30s, but since the 1950s it has been played more often in 4/4 time. Other guitarists have recorded this well-known piece in different tunings; one of the most influential is Leonard Kwan's instrumental rendition in a unique G6th Mauna Loa tuning (D-G-D-E-G-D from lowest-pitched string to highest) on his album, SLACK KEY, referred to as "the red album" in slack key circles (on the Tradewinds Records label).

11. *'50s Medley: Silhouettes (On the Shade)/Goodnight My Love/Can't Help Falling In Love (With You)*

Like many musicians of his generation, Bla enjoys R&B and rock music from his formative years in the '50s and '60s. "These songs will always be with me," he says, "from the days of Oxfords, Levi jackets, chops, curly hair hanging down in front. Cool. Real cool."

Bla has always enjoyed interjecting a few golden oldies into every set. He feels his diverse tastes stem from his father. "He always enjoyed all kinds of music," Bla says, "jazz, Latin, even rock. He really loved The Beatles and The Stones. **Hey Jude** and **Lady Jane** were his favorites; you should've heard him play them on the steel."

This medley is played on the nylon string guitar. It opens with the hit **Silhouettes**, from 1957, which The Rays took up to #3, and The Diamonds took up to #10. Jesse Belvin's beautiful **Goodnight My Love** dates from 1953. Elvis Presley debuted **Can't Help Falling In Love** in his 1962 movie BLUE HAWAII. "I'm working on **Love Me Tender** for a future album," Bla says, "it's even slower. More tears."

12. *Isa Lei*

Isa Lei is the beautiful Fijian song of farewell popularized in Hawai'i by Harry Owens,

composer of **Sweet Leilani**. Gabby performed it in a medley with **Aloha 'Oe** on the album Pure Gabby in his own F Wahine tuning (F-C-E-G-C-E).

Although Bla recorded a vocal version on the PAHINUI BROTHERS album, he says, "I loved this song and wanted to do it again as an instrumental for this album."

Notes by Jay W. Junker, with technical assistance by George Winston.

Mahalo to:

My wife Kathleen and both our families, the Lord, and Milton Lau.

Dancing Cat would like to thank:

Alan Yoshioka at Harry's Music, Dirk Vogel, Leimomi Akana, Navarre, and all the hardworking people at Dancing Cat, Windham Hill and BMG Music, Inc.

Produced by George Winston and Howard Johnston.

Recorded, engineered and mixed by Howard Johnston, with additional engineering by Porter Miller, Maurice Ricks and Mark Slagle.

Mastered by Bernie Grundman at Bernie Grundman Mastering in Los Angeles, CA.

Cover photography by Dennis Fujimoto.

Interior photography by Milton Lau and Chuck Hendel.

Graphic design and digital cover art by Nelson Makua Design.

Booklet editing by Heather Gray.

Layout by Su Gatch.