

LINER NOTES

Bla Pahinui

WINDWARD HEART LIVE SOLO

Born in 1942 to the late slack key guitar legend Gabby Pahinui (1921–1980), founder of the modern slack key era (He made the first ever slack key recordings in 1946.), and the late Emily Pahinui, Bla was raised in Waimanalo, on O'ahu's picturesque windward side, and is one of the most individualistic Hawaiian musicians of his generation. Though he is very much his father's son, he has carved a distinctive niche in Hawaiian music. "I go back to the fifties and I love my rhythm and blues," he says. "So when it comes to Hawaiian music, sometimes I find myself changing it, not to destroy it, but to express it the way I hear it." He feels his main innovations are in phrasing. "I don't like to rush the note," he says. "I like to stretch it and to take the melody in a new direction." He adds that in recent years he's learned the value of understatement. "You can say so much with simplicity. The most important thing is how you present the tone, and how things fit together in the big picture."

Although he likes to experiment, Bla's firmest commitments remain to the song and the audience. "Whatever you do, bottom line, it has to work," he says. "It has to be real, but it has to work – not just for you but also for the other musicians and for whoever takes the time to listen to you. My dad got away with a lot of stuff because it worked. And he touched so many people because he shared what was in his heart in such an honest and direct way." Bla finds this approach both artistically satisfying and spiritually rewarding. "When you give away the good that's inside you, when you play for the audience, not just for you, so much *mana* (power) comes back. It makes a big difference in the music and in how you act as a person."

As discussed more fully in the liner notes to his first Dancing Cat release, MANA (Dancing Cat 38033), Bla's history in music extends back to the 1950s. The second oldest son of Gabby Pahinui, Bla grew up surrounded by song. Jam sessions at the Bell Street family home were almost daily occurrences. "Sometimes there'd be a hundred people there," Bla recalls. "It would go on for days, but when my mom went to church Sunday morning, that was the sign that everybody better be gone when she got back. Well, my father would wait an hour or so, till he figured the service was just about over, and then he'd get everybody out in the yard working. When mom came home and saw us all sweating away, she'd forgive everything and cook a big meal for everybody. And the party would go on for another couple days!"

Gabby and his many musician friends always encouraged the *kamali'i* (children) to join in the music. Bla built his own first instrument around the age of ten. "I took an old two-by-four, put four nails at the top, four nails at the bottom, and stretched some fishing line between them for strings. I used to play that for hours." About a year later, his father got him his first store-bought instrument: a Martin tenor 'ukulele. "The first song he taught me to play was **Poor People of Paris**," recalls Bla.

The 'ukulele became Bla's best friend and constant companion. "It cost \$78, a lot of money back then. I used to take it everywhere, until one night I took it to a friend's house. They were having a party, and everybody was playing music. It got late, and I fell asleep. When I woke up, the 'ukulele was gone. I looked everywhere and asked everybody, but I never did find it. I tell you, I

was afraid to go home after that!" Even after all these years, Bla still misses that Martin. "Whoever's got it, I wish they'd give it back; it has a lot of sentimental value to me."

Bla switched over to guitar as a teenager. A lefty in a world of right-handers, he learned to play it upside down and backwards from the normal position. This led him to start picking the deeper, bass strings with his index finger and the higher strings with his thumb, creating a very unique sound, especially within the slack key tradition. His use of vibrato, ornaments and chord voicings is also very distinctive, especially the descending bass lines on minor chords and his use of diminished chords. One can hear how Bla and his brother Cyril have influenced each other's guitar styles. To add emphasis in his arrangements, Bla also developed a percussive upward strum with his thumbnail that remains a hallmark of his style.

Bla usually plays in the "Dropped D" Tuning, in which the five highest-pitched strings are the same as in Standard Tuning. This sometimes gives his music a sound similar to the beautiful Mainland American folk guitar tradition, especially guitarists like James Taylor.

In the late 1950s, as Bla began to meet more musicians his own age, he expanded his musical interests into Latin music and R&B. He feels that the Latin music has mostly influenced his guitar playing, while the R&B has more deeply affected his vocal style. Around the time R&B began to be marketed as rock and roll, it started to receive wider exposure in Hawai'i. Local clubs began importing Mainland acts, giving Bla and his friends a chance to hear the music live. He fondly recalls the club Betty Reilly ran in Waikiki. "What a joy!" he says. "We'd stay there all night." Clubs also began hiring local kids to play the popular new music, which inspired Bla and some friends to start their own band, The Playboys. "Two guitars, bass and drums. We did a lot of Chuck Berry songs. I played a Telecaster back then. Good fun days." Through the years, Bla has retained his love of R&B, especially the classic doo wop of Shep and The Limelites, Frankie Lymon and the Teenagers, Bob and Earl, The Del-Vikings and many others.

Another main influence, not surprisingly, is Gabby. Bla says that when he was growing up, his father answered his musical questions, but mostly taught by example, and encouraged individuality rooted in tradition. "He bought me everything I wanted," Bla recalls, "even a purple Les Paul. 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.'"

In the early 1960s, with the folk music boom in full swing, Bla returned to acoustic music and his Hawaiian roots. In 1962, he met Peter Moon at Ala Moana Bowls, a popular surfing break. "Peter always carried his 'ukulele with him, so I started bringing down my guitar." In 1966, Peter proposed doing an album for Hula, the label Gabby recorded on with The Sons of Hawai'i. By then, Peter and Bla's group included singer Palani Vaughan, bassist Albert Kalima, Jr. and Bla's younger brother, Cyril. "We came out with MEET PALANI VAUGHAN & THE SUNDAY MANOA (Hula Records 524)," he says. "After that, Palani left and Cyril went into the service. We carried on with the HAWAIIAN TIME album (Hula Records 528 – out of print), and Peter went on from there."

The Sunday Manoa specialized in traditional material, both reflecting and helping expand the grassroots revival going on among young local musicians of the time. In the early 1970s, Gabby left the Sons of Hawai'i and drafted his sons Bla, Cyril, Martin and Philip to join him in the Gabby Pahinui Hawaiian Band, one of the most popular and influential groups of the era. At the height of what is often referred to as the Hawaiian Renaissance, the Gabby Band filled venues, outsold big Mainland releases and revitalized the slack key scene. The group also included bassist Joe Gang and slack key masters Sonny Chillingworth and Atta Isaacs, but it was Gabby, known affectionately as Pops, who ruled the roost.

"My dad was really flowing back then," Bla recalls. "He had all his 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 record and perform with family and friends. In 1992, their father's wish partly came to pass when Bla, Martin and Cyril reunited for an album entitled THE PAHINUI BROTHERS (Panini 2014). Recorded on Maui, with Ry Cooder, David Lindley, Jim Keltner, Van Dyke Parks, Dwight Yoakam, Nick DeCaro and others, it came out to rave reviews. Since then, Bla has continued to pursue music in his spare time, and work for the city and county of Honolulu. Like his brother Martin, a member of the new slack key-based quartet Hui Aloha, Bla really enjoys playing with a band. "Lately, I've been working with a younger blues and roots music band," he says. "I want to mix my Hawaiian music with Mexican and Latin music, even a little Cajun and zydeco. Some people don't understand it, but my dad and Sonny (Chillingworth) would relate to it. They were both really into Latin music. The rhythms are different, but the texture and the feel of the music is very close to slack key."

Also, like his brother Cyril, Bla has been recording solo for Dancing Cat. "I always told myself I was just a rhythm guitar player," he says. "But playing solo, opened up a whole new way of playing for me and gave me a lot more confidence." Bla's first solo release, MANA (Dancing Cat 38033), appeared in 1997.

WINDWARD HEART collects live solo performances. "Most of it was done totally out of the blue," Bla says. "There was no set list, no planning, I didn't even know I was being recorded, I was just having fun." Producer George Winston says, "I was there and this was the first time I had seen Bla play in person. This was an incredible and totally soulful and deep moment in time, and I have listened to it hundreds of time over the years and played it for so many friends. I know it had to be heard. I always let it be known that Bla is one of my biggest inspirations to play music, and technically he is my biggest influence for playing in the key of D."

Bla says he was quite surprised when George called to say he wanted to release the live recordings. "I offered to do something more technical, more polished, but he said the tapes were one-in-a-million just the way they were. And after listening to them, I see his point. It's all real, no editing or overdubs, just one guy up there having a blast, and following his heart. And that's very cool."

TUNINGS:

Bla plays all songs on this recording in "Dropped D" Tuning (D-A-D-G-B-E, Standard Tuning with the lowest pitched E string tuned down two half steps to D). All songs are played in the key of D, except **Moonlight Lady**, which is played in the keys of C and D, and four songs in which the guitar is played using the key of D chords but capoed to the third fret to sound in the key of F to match his vocal range. The four capoed songs are **Waimanalo Blues**, **Medley: Wai O Ke Aniani/E Nihi Ka Hele**, **May God Bless You** and **Ua**.

THE SONGS:

1. Introduction by Jacqueline "Honolulu Skylark" Rossotti

One of Hawaiian music's best loved radio personalities, the Honolulu Skylark, introduces Bla. Bla then dedicates his performance to Mama Isaacs, widow of the late slack key great, and Gabby's best friend, Leland "Atta" Isaacs.

2. *Waimanalo Blues* (vocal)

Bla's opening song, **Waimanalo Blues**, is a powerful expression of *aloha 'aina* (love of the land). It dates from the early 1970s, when statehood and urbanization were bringing rapid, controversial change to the islands. Liko Martin and Thor Wold wrote the song as **Nanakuli Blues**, for O'ahu's Leeward coast, but singers related so strongly to it that they began to change the setting to their own locales. When Country Comfort, from O'ahu's Windward side, recorded it as **Waimanalo Blues**, the song became a massive local hit and the name stuck. "To me, that song says so much," Bla says. "And it has really stood the test of time." He adds that performers should remember that it all started in Nanakuli. "I love to sing about Waimanalo, but the people up in Nanakuli need to be represented too. It's their song that they're sharing with us." Bla also sang it, with band accompaniment, on the 1992 recording **THE PAHINUI BROTHERS** (Panini 2014). Note the poignant, beautiful 6th intervals on the guitar near the end of the song.

3. **Medley: Wai O Ke Aniani/E Nihi Ka Hele** (vocal)

In tribute to his father, Bla does a medley of two songs closely associated with Gabby. On **Wai O Ke Aniani** he even tosses in Gabby's signature vocal styles, both falsetto and low, growling, incredibly expressive *'i'i* (feisty) vocals, much to the crowd's delight. He also plays a beautiful instrumental guitar solo and soulfully adds extra measures at the end of the verse. Note his great transition to **E Nihi Ka Hele**. "Doing my father's songs, I just can't help trying to sound like him," Bla says. "It's not intentional, it's natural."

Gabby recorded **Wai O Ke Aniani** in 1946 for the Bell Label (available on **THE HISTORY OF SLACK KEY GUITAR**, Hana Ola 24000), in 1961 on the recording made

by Dave Guard (PURE GABBY, Hula 567) and in 1972 for Panini (GABBY, Panini 1002). The title of this traditional song is often translated as "clear water," but, typical of Hawaiian poetry, other meanings are possible. It's adapted from an older song for Keaniani Ridge in O'ahu's Moanalua Valley.

Popularly attributed to King Kalakaua's Healan Glee Club, **E Nihī Ka Hele** dates back to 1887. It centers on Queen Kapi'olani and then-Princess Lili'uokalani's trip to England. It speaks of their adventures and asks the winds to bring the royal travelers safely home. Bla's version here is filled with a bittersweet feeling, and he again plays a great and soulful solo, featuring his beautiful vibrato. A touching feeling is created by the way he comes back into the vocal after the guitar solo. Bla first recorded **E Nihī Ka Hele** in 1983 on his self-titled album on the Mountain Apple label (BLA PAHINUI, Mountain Apple 2002).

4. *Gabby's Song* (vocal)

Bla wrote this *mele inoa* (name song) for his father in 1983. It also first appeared on his Mountain Apple album. "I wrote it because I missed him. I just wanted to tell him thanks and that I loved him. My mom told me that he knew how I felt, but I tell you; sometimes I was his worst nightmare. When we played together, I couldn't just say, 'Yes, Dad, if that's what you want, I'll do it.' I always had to push his buttons, and he kicked me off the stage sometimes right in front of everybody. But I have to say he was right. He was the star and he still is, up in Heaven. Now I understand where he was coming from, and that makes me love him even more." Bla's guitar solo is full of feeling with great vibrato and pull-offs. A pull-off is when a fretted note is struck, then the fretting hand rapidly releases or "pulls off" the string producing a rapid second open (unfretted) note.

5. *E Pili Mai* (vocal)

Written by Peter Moon and Larry Lindsey Kimura, **E Pili Mai** debuted in 1982 on the Peter Moon Band's album CANE FIRE (Panini 1012) with vocals by Bla's brother, Cyril. In it, the singer asks a loved one to be close and wishes that the two of them could see the fiery cliffs at Makana. "Cyril inspired me to do that one," Bla says. "He did such a beautiful job. I wanted to recapture some of that beauty and try to do it in my style." In the lyrics an English phrase, "Sweetheart mine" is sung amidst the Hawaiian lyrics, a technique sometimes used with great emotional effect in poignant songs, such as the classic **Kaula 'Ili** (a beautiful version of this song is on Sonny Chillingworth's recording [SONNY SOLO](#) on Dancing Cat). In the verbal introduction, Bla also mentions Bobby Hall, who was another great singer with Peter's band, and is especially well known for his falsetto.

This song features a striking bridge in B minor, with the main body of the song in the key of D. Bla adds his own beautiful intro and his own haunting instrumental bridge modulating to the key of C, using major 7th chords, ending up with G Major 7, to F Major 7, to Eb Major 7, to the beautiful A7sus4 chord, to A7 and back to D Major.

This version is one of the most tearful love ballads ever recorded. Bla also acknowledges

an audience member that spontaneously interprets the song as a hula dance, one of the many deep traditions from Hawai'i, the place that many feel is the heart of the world.

6. *Pauoa Liko Ka Lehua* (vocal)

Written by the early radio and nightclub entertainer Emma Bush, this slack key favorite discusses a romance in the Honolulu neighborhood of Pauoa. There, according to the *mele* (text), the *liko ka lehua* (lehua bud) is longed for with never-ending desire. "That's a standard, a classic," says Bla. "It just popped into my head out of the blue. I didn't rehearse it or anything, I just pulled it out of my hat." He creates a stirring instrumental introduction, again using vibrato and pull-offs, as he also does in the two great instrumental breaks. Additionally, he uses beautiful ascending and descending diminished chords at the end. A great slack key version was also recorded by Ray Kane on his 1994 recording [PUNAHELE](#).

7. *If I Give My Heart to You* (vocal)

Asking spiritual permission of Gabby and Leland "Atta" Isaacs, the two guitar greats for whom the annual Honolulu slack key festival is named, Bla changes the pace with a 1950s pop song he learned off the old YOUR HIT PARADE television show. Nat King Cole had a minor hit with this song, but Bla most fondly recalls a doo wop rendition by the Five Js. "That was our little group back in Waimanalo," he says. "Three or four times a week we'd go down to the Waimanalo gym and sing in the bathroom, where the echo was best. We had to walk three miles to get there and three miles back. Cruisin' is real hard when you don't have a car!" His use of the bass lines in the E minor chords is particularly beautiful, as is his use of the diminished chords and the soulful instrumental ending.

8. *Moonlight Lady* (vocal)

Like **Waimanalo Blues**, this Carlos Andrade and Pat Cockett original achieved anthem status in the 1970s. The Gabby Band version, with vocals by Bla and Randy Lorenzo, was one of the biggest hits on the 1975 recording THE GABBY PAHINUI HAWAIIAN BAND, VOL. I (Panini 1007). In 1987, Carlos and Pat finally recorded their own memorable version with their excellent Kaua'i-based group Na Pali on PACIFIC TUNINGS (Awapuhi 101). "Whenever I play a show, there's always a request for it, which is fine with me cause I love the song," says Bla. He learned it directly from the composers. "About three years later, I asked my dad if we could record it, and he said okay. It still gets played on the radio, which is real cool."

Part of the song is in the key of C, while the main body is in the key of D. Notice the striking bridge in B minor. Bla plays a beautiful introduction and instrumental break later, featuring great picking and the use of a high drone open E note on the highest pitched string. Also note his very soulful guitar fills between the vocal phrases and the verses, and the beautiful tempo retard at the end.

9. **Dialogue: Memories of Gabby**

10. ***Pua Tuberosa*** (vocal)

Pua Tuberosa dates back to the 1920s, a time when Hawaiian music was widely available around the world on record, over the radio and in live performance. Composed by Kimo Kamana, the song poetically describes a highly aromatic tuberose wrapped around a more subtly scented maile vine. This is the sweet scent of a love that will never be forgotten. Bla shared lead vocals on the version that appeared on Gabby's 1977 album **THE GABBY PAHINUI BAND, VOL. II** (Panini 1008). "I'm so proud I got to sing this song with my dad," Bla says. "And the steel part he did on that record is so beautiful. Whenever I sing **Pua Tuberosa**, I flashback to those days of doing it with him." This song features two more great instrumental solos with Bla's trademark soulful vibrato, and a beautiful ending with fast rolls and harmonics. He sings with deep, deep feeling, using his full vocal range. Other slack key recordings of **Pua Tuberosa** include a vocal version by Sonny Chillingworth in 1994 on **SONNY SOLO** and an instrumental version by Keola Beamer in 1997 [MAUNA KEA - WHITE MOUNTAIN JOURNAL](#) (Dancing Cat).

11. ***Makapu'u Beach*** (vocal)

Another memorable song that Bla sang on album **THE GABBY PAHINUI BAND, VOL. II**, this original *mele pana* (place song) honors the Windward side's most famous bodysurfing beach. "When we first moved to Waimanalo in 1956-57, I got into bodysurfing, so I would go to Makapu'u a lot. Later, it was the hangout for all the boys and girls, not just the bodysurfers. Now that I live on the other side of the island, I don't get out there much, but the song brings back lots of memories for me. The lyrics are all things we did there growing up. It's all true." Another beautiful instrumental guitar introduction and instrumental break state the melody with subtle variations.

12. ***Waimanalo Country Boy*** (vocal)

Also first appearing on the Mountain Apple album, this autobiographical original focuses on themes dear to many Hawaiian songwriters: aloha for *ku'u one hanau* (birthplace) and the superiority of rural life. "I wanted it to talk about what a country boy goes through everyday," says Bla. "Being close to nature, feeling aloha for your home, your family and friends, and just cruisin' with no worries in life." He beautifully answers his vocals with great guitar phrases throughout the song, and plays a great instrumental verse at the end.

13. ***May God Bless You (You'll Never Meet Another Kanaka Like Me)*** (vocal)

Popularized by Don Ho, **May God Bless You** is one of several English language party songs familiar to all Hawaiian musicians of a certain age. Whether they realize it or not, many of these musicians can play the song and will, if someone else starts up the familiar refrain. "In the 1960s, you heard it everywhere," recalls Bla. "After awhile you'd find yourself singing along, it's an automatic response, like a reflex action." Bla says he first sang **May God Bless You** as a young teenager. "I can still picture all the boys and girls harmonizing to it," he says. "When we were about 13, we sang it every night. I'm glad there's finally a recording."

Bla varies the standard chord structure of the song by adding a G minor chord with a Bb bass, then going to an E diminished chord, implying an A7b9 chord (these are with the key of D fingerings since the guitar is capoed up 3 frets to sound in the key of F, the chords would actually sound as Bb minor to G diminished, implying a C7b9 chord). Bla plays another great instrumental break subtly varying the melody. Again note the beautiful and poignant guitar 6th intervals near the end, the same way he ended **Waimanalo Blues**, the opening song of this concert. These two songs frame the whole concert beautifully.

14. **Encore: *Meleana E*** (vocal)

This century-old party song celebrates a Norwegian-Hawaiian woman and some of her many adventures around Honolulu. In 1997, Bla released a studio version on the 1997 recording [MANA](#) (Dancing Cat). "It's been done so many times," he says. "I just wanted to do it for fun, my way, with different phrasing. I wanted to take the melody down where most people take it up. I just thought, gee, that's different, you know, but it works." The blues and R&B influence is especially evident in his guitar solos. The first instrumental break beautifully sets up his incredible second guitar solo where he uses artificial harmonics with bent notes.

15. ***Ua (Rain)*** (instrumental)

This impressionistic slack key instrumental composed by Bla comes from a session he did in the studio. "We tried all kinds of things," Bla says. "We were just flowin', relaxed and easy." This gently stated, romantic song of quiet reflection, so reminiscent of post-concert introspection, makes a fitting end for the album.

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MAHALOS:

George Winston, Howard Johnston, all the Dancing Cat staff, the good Lord, my wife Kathleen, Milton Lau, all my family, friends and fans.